



**MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS
AND
MY ESCAPE FROM SOLOVETSKI**



YOURI BEZSONOV

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS *and* MY ESCAPE FROM SOLOVETSKI

by

YOURI BEZSONOV

One time Captain in the Caucasian Divisional Cavalry,
‘The Savage Division’



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED MCMXXIX

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
BUTLER & TANNER LTD
FROME

C O N T E N T S

CHAP.	page
TRANSLATOR'S NOTE	7
LETTER TO MY SISTER	9
1 LAST DAYS OF LIBERTY	15
2 FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON	20
3 OUR FIRST EXAMINATION	43
4 AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION	51
5 A FLIRTATION	65
6 ESCAPE	79
7 WITH THE WHITE ARMY	88
8 ABANDONED TO THE ENEMY	96
9 MORE PRISONS	102
10 PRISON AND HOSPITAL	105
11 MY TRIAL	113
12 OUTLAWED	120
13 'BUSINESS' IN EARNEST	126
14 'REVELRY'	132
15 ARRESTED FOR THE SIXTH TIME	138
16 SIBERIA	146
17 MY SECOND ESCAPE	152
18 AMONG THIEVES AND PROSTITUTES	159
19 BURIED TREASURE	164
20 SEVENTH ARREST	167
21 SIX MONTHS OF SOLITARY CONFINEMENT	169
22 THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS	198
23 FINAL ESCAPE (EXTRACTS FROM DIARY)	225
24 FINLAND	275
EXTRACTS FROM A LETTER TO MY SISTER	280

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE IN FRENCH
EDITION

BEZSONOV! He is the most discussed author in every Russian community abroad, and even in Soviet Russia.

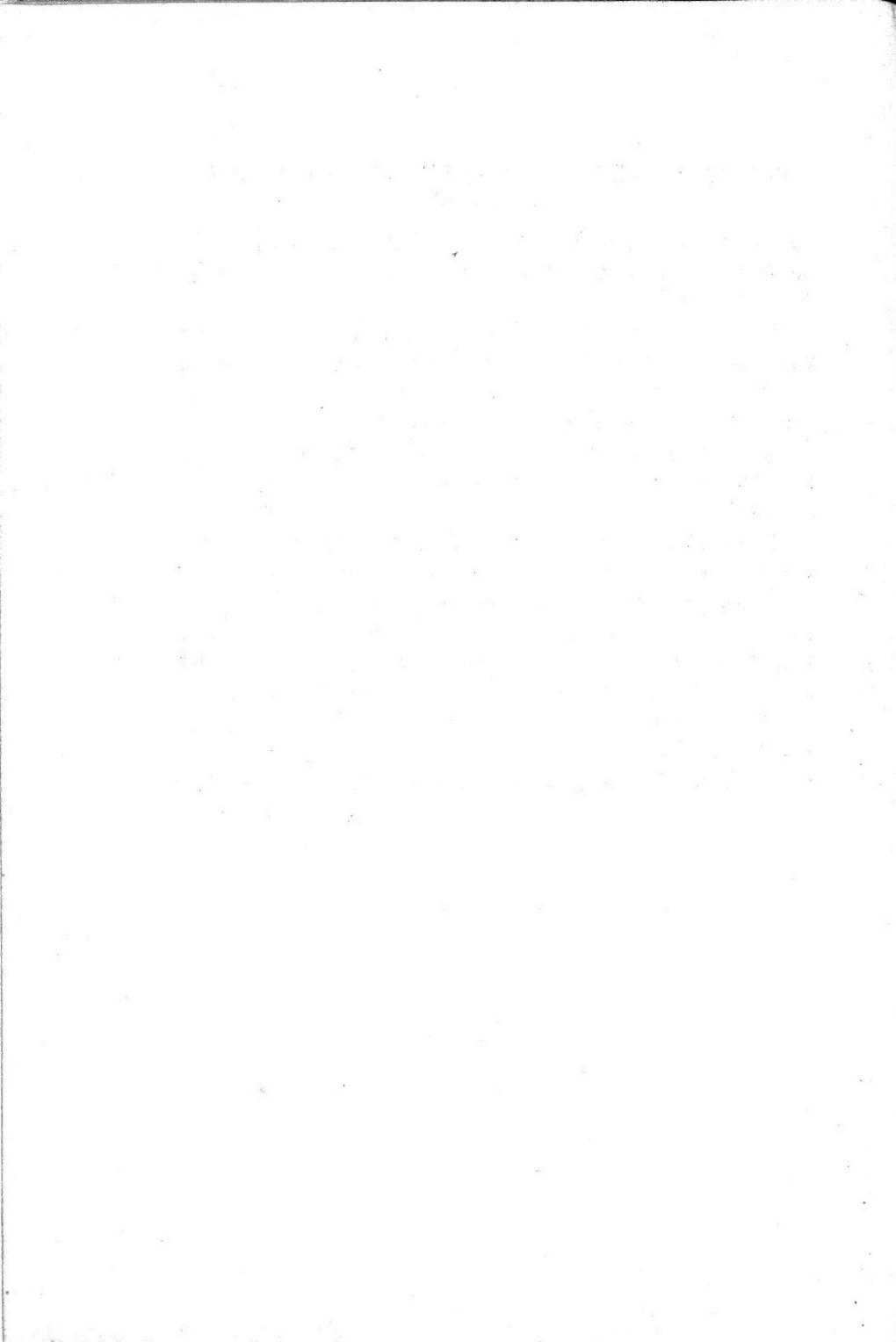
No book on revolutionary Russia speaks with such complete authority as that of Y. D. Bezsonov.

He neither invents nor imagines; he relates, simply and conscientiously, what he saw, what he lived through, what he suffered under the Soviet regime during ten long years beginning with the *coup d'état* in 1917.

I would not comment on Bezsonov's miraculous escapes, each one an impressive witness to his iron will, nor on his wonderful victories over gaolers and *juges d'instruction*; nor would I speak of his last journey, lasting thirty-six days, through the lakes and marshy forests of Polar Russia and Finland.

What is most impressive in Bezsonov is his spiritual mind, his fine character. This story of his return to belief in God will move the faithful of every creed.

E. SEMENOFF



A LETTER TO MY SISTER

MY DEAR SISTER,

Will you believe me when I say that I am as a drunkard, only intoxicated with the pleasure of liberty, half-choked by the joy of living. I cannot force myself to collect my thoughts sufficiently to express the greatness of my happiness, in words.

I have been trying for several days to write to you. I feel I want you to share my delight, but cannot bring myself to write coherently. I am so happy to be free, that I can hardly believe it is really true, and am quite unable to express it all in a proper letter.

We have been separated for eight years; eight years of almost complete silence. And now, we can have real news of each other; not the illicit correspondence of eight years ago; when we were only able to exchange ridiculous little notes, written in a childishly simple cipher, or had to trust to rumours and reports, but real intercourse, with the full possibility of saying all we wish.

I cannot realize it yet; I am not used to my liberty; I have lost the habit of expressing myself freely; my mind is not clear. I try to concentrate it on the more important facts and they all seem equally important.

Well to begin with . . . I am abroad . . .

You cannot understand how much life and meaning there is in these words, to me, who have escaped with my life from what was formerly our country. All is said in these few words. I can breathe freely,

LETTER TO MY SISTER

I understand, I am free, I am happy, I am alive, I am a man again. Unfortunately I cannot tell you in one short sentence, in a few words all that has happened to me both for good or evil. There have been too many events; I have been through too much to be able to tell you all at once. But first of all, and most important of all, the foundation and beginning of all — I believe in God!

Twenty-six prisons, escapes, fighting, an outlaw's life, Whites, Reds, prison-cars, criminals and prostitutes, moral and physical suffering, the perpetual menace of capital punishment did their work of strengthening my spirit; but they could not do all.

On that memorable morning, when, having disarmed our guard, and left the convict-prison of Solovetski behind us, we came out into the forest, a huge expanse of swamp and forest separated us from the Finnish frontier. We reached it in thirty-six days. The strength I have now is not mine; it is not my self-will that governs me now; it is the subjection of my will to God's and it is not my way that is right, but the only true way, that was shown us by Christ.

It is a difficult way. I go wrong every hour, every moment. I am weak, weak because of my strength. But I see the right path before me. I believe in Truth, Goodness — God in fact. I am still staggering, but I am moving on and I hope to arrive.

Now you know that I am alive and have the firm hope of seeing you soon. But in the meantime, while all the past is fresh in my memory, I want to tell you

LETTER TO MY SISTER

about my life there, so that everything may be clear to you. I am going to tell you all that I saw, felt, lived through; just exactly as it all happened: all the truth and only the truth.

Your affectionate brother, G. B.

Finland, 1925.

P.S. I am sending you my photograph, taken just before leaving the little village of Koussoma, a fortnight after we had crossed the frontier. I had had plenty of time to wash and shave, and the holes in my clothes had been mended before it was taken. In the group from right to left are: Malbrotsky, Malsagoff (with his legs bandaged), Sazonoff and Pribloudine.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

CHAPTER I

LAST DAYS OF LIBERTY

THE Winter Palace was on the point of capitulation. Outside there were armed bands of Bolsheviks and endless shots from the cruiser *Aurora*. Inside panic and disorder reigned; officers and Bolsheviks; women-volunteers and spies; meetings held and a number of different commanders and chiefs persuading their men to go on fighting. A man with a long beard was extremely eloquent, inducing, imploring all to go on defending. Whom? It was not certain whether it was the Government that was to be defended, or the orator himself. Conferences and interviews were being held between the hostile forces. The Cossacks withdrew, well armed, each with two or three revolvers in their pockets.

On the river bank the searchlight of the *Aurora* picked us out, armoured cars rattled up and down. In this ominous, strained atmosphere, an accidental shot, a spark would inevitably provoke an explosion and then we would be done for. But we reached the Liteiny bridge and the strain lessened.

We now had to decide what to do with ourselves. Where were we to go? we were outlaws and vagabonds now. The Cossacks took me in for the night. I had been with them for three days when a messenger arrived with the news that some Cossacks, adherents of the Bolsheviks, had arrested those of their officers who had taken part in the defence of

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

the Winter Palace. I at once took up my revolvers and went off.

I went back to my hotel, the Astoria, which had been the centre and meeting place of officers and of the anti-Bolshevik community. I knew I ran the risk of being arrested there, but I cared little what happened to me! On entering the room I had occupied I saw that it had not yet been searched. I have a hazy remembrance of the days that followed. I spent them in a state of tipsyness . . . I know it was wrong of me to go on like that, but then nothing mattered. A feeling of Nemesis pervaded everything, I only wanted to forget, to get away from reality at any price, even for a day, for a moment. And I was not the only one, there were many others who tried, as I did, to forget, who did senseless and foolhardy things. The midnight march through Bolshevik Petrograd of the sailors of the Guard with their band playing, was an example.

The last convulsions, the death-agony, the inexplicable, incomprehensible, but quite clearly defined end of something. And at the same time the first ugly grimaces of the victorious Bolshevik, the ugly monster showing his teeth at night. Sailors and members of the Cheka were stealing and looting. Everything that was worth taking was 'requisitioned,' especially wine. The perquisitions were followed by arrests. Then shots began to be heard, single far-away shots that sounded harmless enough at first.

There was a Bolshevik official in command at the

LAST DAYS OF LIBERTY

Astoria. The electric light went out in the hall. The carpets disappeared. The servants were changed. The hotel was 'requisitioned!'

I was asked and then ordered to leave the hotel, and at last threatened with something dreadful if I did not leave. I stayed on for no other reason than that I was perfectly indifferent to everything and did not care what happened to me. I had no wishes, no initiative, my only idea was to try and notice as little as possible and so live through the day. At last I moved to a friend's house. The Cheka had already begun its work and was busy searching whole districts. We played the part of ostriches, and being inexperienced, barricaded our doors or stayed away for the night. We could get nothing but smoked fish to eat.

*

In January 1918 I escaped from Petrograd and established myself in Solsk, a small town in the province of Pskov. There I led a very quiet, peaceful life. It was a real Russian winter. I had a little room in an attic. The house was well heated and there was a large stove in my room. There were tiny windows with pots of flowers, neat white muslin curtains tied with ribbon and well-kept old-fashioned furniture. In the evenings a lamp with a blue shade was brought in and a samovar. There was an oil-lamp burning in a corner before the icon; this gave the room the appearance of a convent cell, only sometimes we were two in the 'cell.' What delightful days those were and what a pity it was that they were

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

so rare. On Easter night an izvostchik drove up to the door, and a well-known voice called to me to come down. This visit was unexpected and I was overjoyed at hearing the voice. I lost no time in finding the box of matches and rushing downstairs. The Easter night service followed and then breakfast. At times I had nothing to buy a little tobacco with, but on this occasion we had everything — all the usual Easter food, and even some ham and vodka of which the good-natured landlord took a little too much and assured me towards dawn that on Easter morning the sun dances on rising. It was all delightful.

I could earn a little by sawing firewood. I worked all day from 6 a.m. till 6 p.m. The work was pleasant enough. I used to feel rather tired after a day's work and had no time to take much notice of what was going on. There was a general living in the little town who had submitted to the Soviet. He found out about me and sent for me. I went and was offered a high post in the Red Army which was just then being formed. I refused, but he insisted and did his best to persuade me. I refused very decidedly and continued my solitary existence, working hard and cut off from everything. In summer my work came to an end and I decided to go in for commerce or rather for speculation.

It was just then that my friend, Captain Iuriev, came to stay with me. We had always been great friends, had almost grown up together, knew each other very well and strangely enough had always

LAST DAYS OF LIBERTY

been thrown together at exceptional moments of our lives. He was tall, very thin and dark, and his face expressed great firmness of character. He was indeed self-willed to the point of obstinacy sometimes, was always outwardly very calm and quiet, but was at heart a very sensitive man. He was an excellent friend. He was very hidebound in judging himself and had often harmed himself by judging others in the same way. I prized his friendship very highly.

I went to Petrograd in August and was lucky enough to procure some saccharin, which, on my return to Solsk, I exchanged for flour with some profit to myself. My business seemed to flourish and I soon went again to Petrograd, not suspecting that after this journey freedom would be over for a long time.

C H A P T E R I I
F I R S T E X P E R I E N C E I N P R I S O N

THIS is how it all began. I was returning to our little town with further supplies of saccharin. It was early morning. I came out of the station and, on my way to hire an izvostchik, noticed a little man who was walking before me. I noticed him because he was a hunchback. I got into the fly and told the driver my address. We drove off to where I lived on the outskirts of the town. Izvostchiks were rare there, so I was surprised to hear one driving along behind us. I turned to look round, and saw the hunchback. Still perfectly unsuspecting, I went up to my room and found everything in it turned upside down and inside out. The dismayed landlady ran in to tell me of Iuriev's arrest. 'The hunchback is a detective and I am caught like a rat in a trap,' I thought at once. There was not a moment to lose to get to the nearest station and take the first train to Petrograd. But I remembered that Iuriev had no money and I had the saccharin, so I decided to give it into the safe-keeping of some friends of ours, before escaping. I went out into the garden, climbed over the wall and in a roundabout way reached our friends' house. But I had been watched and before I had been there five minutes, two members of the Cheka made their appearance, conducted by the hunchback; they showed me a warrant for my search and immediate arrest. I was obliged to submit to being led away and taken back to my

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

room. It was my first experience of walking through the streets under arrest. The sensation was new and rather queer. I wondered what accusation was going to be brought against me.

I own that I was guilty of three offences against the Soviet. The first was that of taking part, soon after the outbreak of the Revolution, in the organization of a military confederacy.

The Revolution, as well as the loss of morale in the army that immediately followed it, originated in Petrograd. The regiments stationed there began the armed revolt that turned into a revolution, and the Petrograd political leaders put themselves at the head of the revolutionary movement. The germs of decay that had been disseminated by the army spread from Petrograd and very soon reached the Front.

It seemed clear to me at the time that it was our duty to join forces with the political leaders, who constituted the Provisional Government, and to start a counter-movement, also originating in Petrograd, that would revive the spirit at the Front.

I had succeeded in collecting, on a single sheet of paper under an order authorizing me to issue appeals for the continuation, of war with Germany, many signatures of influential people beginning with those of Rodzianko, President of the Douma, Gouchkoff, Minister of War, P. Miliukoff and the well-known author Leonid Andreev. Included also, were those of the social-democrats Plehanoff, V. Zassoulitch, the social-revolutionaries Savinkoff and Breshko-Bresh-

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

kovsky, the anarchist Kropotkin, several former political prisoners and many others.

About 20 per cent, of the garrison were with us. We were very active and had reached the point of only having to name the day for entering the different barracks, but it was precisely at this point that the hitch, which prevented the fulfilment of our plan, occurred. At the last moment the Volyn regiment wavered and wanted the decisive day to be put off. This hesitation affected the other regiments and the members of the confederacy so strongly that the whole collapsed like a card-house.

My second offence was that of taking part, as an officer of one of the regiments of the Caucasian Native Division, in General Kornilov's advance on Petrograd in August 1917. The officers in Petrograd were disorganized, they wanted something to rally round. This rallying point was our Caucasian Division.

My belief in the absolute necessity and ultimate success of our enterprise was so complete that, when on night duty at the field telegraph office, I took upon myself to change the wording of a telegram sent by General Kornilov, with the object of rendering it more decisive and convincing. We reached Petrograd, but, in spite of the fact that whole regiments under the generalship of Chernoff and Co. were put to flight by small detachments of our horsemen, we turned away and moved south!

My third offence was more serious. I was on excellent terms with Colonel Polkovnikov, who

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

commanded the Petrograd garrison. I happened to go to see him a few days before the Bolshevik rising of October 1917 and he appointed me assistant commander of the Winter Palace guard. So I took part in its defence on the day it was taken by the Bolsheviks on their final accession to power.

However, not one of the above-named 'crimes' was ever the reason of my numerous arrests in the months that followed, I was never once charged with one of them, and they were not even known to the Soviet Government. The only accusations against me were my having belonged to a Cadet Corps and having finished in the Cavalry school, having been an officer in the Imperial Army and then having done my duty at the front, in defence of my country, during the War.

Our room had already been searched very thoroughly, it seemed to me, and I do not understand why they insisted on a second search. I soon learned not to look for sense and logic in all the Bolsheviks did. As I afterwards found out, Iuriev had very cleverly called their attention to some quite insignificant papers and had skilfully hidden the more important documents under some newspapers that were lying on the table. My dagger had been taken by the Chekists as well as some letters, and receipts (of which they are always most prodigal) had been given in exchange. I may add that nothing was ever returned when these receipts were presented.

The search lasted till 11 a.m. and an hour later I entered a prison for the first time in my life. It was

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

my first acquaintance with the interior of a prison and at the time I had no idea that it was only the beginning of a long series of imprisonments. I was sure that it was all a misunderstanding that would soon be cleared up. In the months that followed I often witnessed the disappointment of just such poor innocents as myself who believed in Soviet justice at first.

The prison was an old-fashioned one-storied building, with a chapel, the cross and dome of which could be seen from a distance. A low brick wall surrounded it. Outside the wall was the Governor's house. At some time or other this old prison had had a coating of whitewash, but it had all fallen off and the whole building presented a pitiful aspect, in no way impressive or awe-inspiring; it was third-rate and small. The room I was taken to was large and airy with ordinary-sized windows behind gratings; it looked bare and as if it had long been disused. There was a large table in the middle of the room and two benches. On entering it I was delighted to see nearly all the people I knew in the town, everyone seemed to be there. There were several former officers, judges, two lawyers, several merchants, two doctors with their sons, and among them all my friend Iuriev. It was curious to see all these educated-looking people, in their usual clothes, sitting and lying about on the floor. Iuriev and I welcomed each other and he told me all that had happened in my absence. I found out that all the officers, 'bourgeoisie' and 'aristocracy' of our little town had been

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

arrested in the last twenty-four hours, they were all accused of various 'crimes.' The accusations were all different. One of the judges was accused of stealing the peasants' corn by picking ears in the fields. The lawyers were being pressed to tell all they knew about the financial and commercial affairs of the 'bourgeoisie.' The Cheka only wanted to get as much money as possible out of each one of this last category of 'criminals.' The case against myself and Iuriev was very silly and at the same time rather serious. A 'manifesto' purporting to come from Lenin in which Bolshevik ideas and teaching were ridiculed was supposed to have been found in our possession, or rather Iuriev's. He was accused of anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation.

Three typewritten copies of the manifesto had been found. They were now trying to find the typewriter and who it belonged to so as to find out who Iuriev's accomplices were. It was clear that I had been arrested as one of them. All this was of course nonsense, but our accusers thought differently. At the inquiry that followed our arrest Iuriev was told that his offence was very serious and the local authorities could not take it upon themselves to decide his fate, so he was to be sent to Petrograd. The people who were responsible for our arrest knew nothing very clearly; they were not even sure how far they could go and what they were to do.

The regime in this prison, compared to what I was to experience later on, was not severe. We had nothing to say against the treatment we met with

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

from the governor and gaolers. We slept on the floor, but were allowed to use our own pillows and blankets. In a small town like the one in which we were living most people had not yet run out of their provisions and so we practically lived on what those of our friends who remained free brought us. The prison rations were certainly bad and exceedingly scanty. Famine was beginning all over Russia, and bread was rationed out to those who still enjoyed their liberty at 1s. 8d. per head, so what could be expected in prison?

At 6 a.m. some boiling water was brought and we were each given a thin slice of bread; at noon large basins and wooden spoons were brought in, then 'cooks' appeared carrying a big cauldron and proceeded to fill the basins with a dirty liquid which smelt of dried fish. The only good quality this 'soup' had was that it was hot. After this so-called dinner we had some more boiling water and could make some tea, if we had any. At 5 p.m. the whole business was repeated and was called supper. Those of the prisoners who had been there several months for petty offences such as theft had a puffed and bloated appearance from the effects of hunger.

The old-time practice of taking prisoners to church, or rather to the prison chapel, was still observed, and this brought us great comfort. The whole atmosphere, the sight of so many companions in misfortune at their devotions, the very fact of praying, had a soothing effect on us all and brought out the best that was in us. We had besides the

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

advantage of seeing people from the outside world, though only at a distance, as the chapel was open to outsiders.

We found it difficult at first to get used to being under constraint. We often wanted to go out, to move, to go somewhere or do something on our own initiative, when we suddenly remembered that we were prisoners. . . . We often joked about this and invited each other for a walk or to supper at a restaurant and so on.

We tried to kill time by talking, and playing chess and draughts (we had made the chess-men and draughts-men). There was not much feeling of depression in our room. None of us felt guilty, or conscious of having committed any crime, and in this little provincial prison the full meaning of the Bolshevik Terror had not yet dawned on us. Some of us were examined every now and then, but very casually. The Chekists were in no hurry. Iuriev was questioned three times. They wanted to find out where the manifesto came from and what he had done in the way of circulating it, as they seemed to consider the fact of its having been used for purposes of propaganda as having been proved. To tell the truth I do not know, even now, how the thing came to be in our room, someone must have given it to Iuriev to read and he had forgotten to destroy it. When he was being questioned for the third time Iuriev was told that his case would be examined in Petrograd. He was suffering at that time from the effects of a fall from his horse, when his leg had

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

been broken and then badly joined. It caused him great pain at times, and he was just then suffering from an acute attack of this pain. As I did not want to leave him in the state he was in I told him to say that I had given him the unlucky manifesto. He did so and two days later I was taken to the Cheka and questioned. It was my first experience of the kind. I was questioned in a lazy, amateurish way. My name, my surname and father's name were asked, also my birthplace. It is the usual beginning and later on I became heartily sick of it. They asked me about the manifesto. I acknowledged having given it to Iuriev. I was then told that I would be sent to Petrograd. This was exactly what I wanted.

The ignorance of the Chekists was extraordinary. For no apparent reason they tried to accuse me of dealings with foreigners; this was quite unfounded. The source of this accusation remains a mystery to me. However it may be, the accusation, having started in a small out-of-the-way country town, where there was not much chance of there ever being any foreigners, pursued me all the rest of my life in Russia, until my escape from Solovetski. At the time I took no notice of the absurd lie.

About the middle of September we were told that we were to be removed to Petrograd in a few days. We had just heard of the Terror reigning there. Its immediate cause had been the murder of Ouritsky and our journey seemed far less attractive now. But it was too late, our fate could only be decided in Petrograd.

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

On the appointed day, at 10 a.m. an armed escort appeared in the prison-yard to conduct us to the station. I remember the disagreeable impression produced on us by seeing ten armed men for two prisoners, it meant that we were important criminals. The escort consisted of ordinary Red guards who still existed at that time. They wore ordinary civilian clothes, with red bows in their button-holes, and bags of cartridges slung over their shoulders. They were armed with rifles, the commanding officer only having a revolver. I have no doubt that the majority could hardly fire a shot.

We came out into the yard, were surrounded by our escort and moved on to the station. Two surprises awaited us there: we found that we were to travel in an ordinary second-class carriage and that we were not to be alone. The presence of a very good-looking woman must have had an excellent effect on the commissary who accompanied us. At first he was very cold and official in his manner to us, but he very soon thawed, joined us and it ended in our all travelling together as the best of friends. He got out at one of the stations to buy our cigarettes, and before we had reached Petrograd he promised to exert his influence in our favour at the Cheka; I really think he did all he could for us, only his influence must not have been very great.

But here was Petrograd, the well-known railway station. We said good-bye to our fellow-travellers and started on foot, well guarded as before. We walked along the familiar streets, we crossed the

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

Fontanka. There seemed to be less traffic than in former times. We walked in the middle of the street, izvostchiks, pedestrians and trams all stopping to let us pass.

At last we reached the renowned Gorokhovaia N. 2. We went into the hall and up the stairs and were shown into the office. There were several 'collaborators' of the Cheka there, some might have been workmen, others had the appearance of educated people, but most had the typical Chekist look about them. It is difficult to define this type: here were to be found the scum and refuse of the Letts and of the Jews, workmen incapable of rising in their trades, unsuccessful lawyers and so on; these had been joined by many professional criminals. In outward appearance they were all very much alike, and all looked as though they were born for the job.

No one took any notice of us for nearly half an hour. The tables were littered with 'trophies' of cases that had previously come before the questioners, heaps of bank-notes, piles of letters, photos, bottles of wine and various weapons, chiefly swords. There were several extremely well-dressed easy-going young 'collaborators,' both male and female, the latter of the type that used to be met at skating-rinks and in gay restaurants; not the good-natured fascinating ones who only think of having a good time and making the most of life, but those whose only object is to fill their pockets as full as possible.

At last two Chekists came up and searched us; they took nothing, for a wonder. They then invited

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

us to follow them. Leading us along several passages, 'Just like an hotel,' thought I, as we stopped before a door with N. 96 on it. The room in which we were confined measured about 20 feet square, there must have been at least fifty people living in it. It was crowded, stuffy and smelly. There were rows of beds and two or three men sitting on each one of them. Others were standing at the open windows trying to get a breath of fresh air. The population of our room was varied: there were several lawyers and officers, the manager of a bank, a doctor, a party of card-players from a club and many others. There were two cripples, whom it was impossible not to notice, they had two legs and four crutches between them. They were of course unfit for general labour and had taken to trade; they bought flour in the villages and brought it to Petrograd, where they sold it. They had been arrested for speculation and had been taken from one prison to another for several months.

I met two officers I had known before, they were Ekesspare and Prince Toumanoff. They told us that we ought to have our names entered on the foreman's list and introduced us to that individual, who owned a separate bed and a little table. He was a good-looking elderly man, very polite and almost affectionate in his manner; he asked our names, wrote them down, invited us to take a seat on his bed and asked us the reason for our arrest. Ekesspare and Toumanoff joined us and I was surprised to hear them telling our foreman quite openly about the

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

organization to which they belonged. They even asked his advice about the answers they were to give at the examination. From the moment I set eyes on him I distrusted that old man and was very careful what I said in his hearing.

After a short chat the foreman showed us the bed that was to be ours, we took possession of it, some of the other prisoners came up and the usual prison conversation began: 'When? Why? What were we accused of?' and in return most of them told us their own histories. In course of time I got used to these accounts, they were all exactly alike. . . Arrested for no apparent reason, kept waiting several months for their case to be inquired into, etc. . . .

The prison food was even worse than it had been in Solsk. Luckily we had some provisions of our own. The first day passed uneventfully. In the daytime the 'Gorokhovaia' is at rest and asleep. It lives at night. The captives took it in turns to sleep on the beds as there were not enough to go round. One or two were called out to be examined.

Towards evening the atmosphere became more charged. The examinations were in full swing. The prisoners were called out one after the other. They all came back very pale and agitated. Death threatened every one of us. Ekesspare and Toumanoff were being questioned for at least the tenth time. When they came back they told the old foreman in detail all they had been asked and the answers they had given. The organization of which they were members had been discovered and the Cheka was

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

trying to get as much information as it could about it. I was again astonished at their frankness. The old man soon left the room and I could not help telling Ekesspare of my suspicions. 'You are quite mistaken,' said he, 'he is a delightful man, a professor, absolutely above suspicion. He has been here three months and as his case is under examination and is unimportant, he enjoys certain privileges, that is all.'

The examinations went on all night. The door opened continually, the prisoners started up every time expecting to hear their own names and waited on in suspense. It was only towards dawn that we were able to go to sleep, when everything at last quieted down. During that night twenty more prisoners were brought in. The place was full and more than full . . . The foreman told us that that evening the prisoners who had been examined were to be taken away to other prisons, so we would be less crowded. He proved right — at 6 p.m. the door opened wider than usual and in walked the notorious Eidouk, head officer and executioner of the Gorokhovaia. He read out the names of those destined to be sent to other prisons and added that they were all to be ready in five minutes with their belongings. An armed escort soon followed and took charge of the prisoners. There was considerably more room for those remaining.

Towards evening everything that had happened on the previous night began again and we started every time the door opened. More captives were

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

brought in. I spent most of that evening talking to Ekesspare and Toumanoff. The former was a sportsman, and we talked about races. We also discovered we had many mutual friends. They (Ekesspare and Toumanoff) had been members of a society whose object was the overthrow of the Bolsheviks; it was supported by foreigners (the English, so he said). He added that he was quite sure of their ultimate success, saying: 'If we do not succeed in getting rid of them, the English will come and turn them out. Our confederacy has been discovered, but there are others and we are sure to win in the end.' He seemed so confident of being right, poor man. He had always been questioned very politely, invited to take a cigarette, offered an arm-chair, luncheons, suppers and so on. The Cheka, according to him, were exceedingly well informed. He had betrayed nothing and had only corroborated what they knew already. He had been quite open with them, had abused the Bolsheviks and Communism in general to their faces and had said that he intended to oppose them in future. In spite of all this they had never failed to assure him that his life would be spared. I could not make out whether he realized the danger of his position or whether he believed in their promises, anyhow he kept up wonderfully. With Toumanoff things were different. He was accused of a multitude of crimes, he was questioned brutally and continually threatened with capital punishment. They were trying to bully him into confessing what he had never done. They had

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

succeeded in terrorizing him, and he was in a very nervous state. He had generally denied his guilt. I do not even know whether he was guilty of any offence against the Government. He was quite a boy.

I had just fallen asleep that night when the door opened and in came Eidouk. This time he had come to call those who were sentenced to be shot. I had never before seen anyone called to their execution. My heart stopped beating. There was absolute silence in the room. All the inmates had, as usual, looked up when the door opened, and on seeing Eidouk had remained motionless; some were deadly pale and trembled convulsively, others tried to distract their thoughts and not give way to the general panic by collecting and folding their clothes and other belongings. Very loudly and in long-drawn-out words, Eidouk read out the names of Ekesspare and Toumanoff and three others and added that they were to take all their belongings with them. There could be no doubt left. Ekesspare was perfectly calm and composed. Toumanoff did his best to restrain his agitation and nervousness. I think they must still have cherished a forlorn hope. I helped them to make a parcel of their few possessions. We bade them good-bye and they were led away.

Dead silence reigned in the room, we all lay down on our beds and listened intently. In a few minutes we heard a shot in the yard below, followed by a low cry, but at that moment the noise of a motor-car was

M Y T W E N T Y - S I X P R I S O N S

heard; it worked on, but did not leave the yard. The men had been executed in a novel way, invented by the Bolsheviks; shots were fired at the men condemned to death by executioners who followed them closely and discharged their rifles or revolvers into them. That night none of us slept . . .

*

Three more days of suspense passed. The days were quite bearable, but the nights, when we expected to be called out at any moment, when others were being continually led away and either returned in an awful state of moral and physical exhaustion or never returned at all, those nights, when the sound of the motor working away to deaden the sound of shots was heard below, were terrible beyond words. They did not leave us very hopeful about our own fate. Exactly a week after our arrival at the Gorokhovaia late one afternoon Eidouk read out our names among those destined for the Deriabinsky prison.

We shouldered our few possessions and, surrounded by an armed guard, started on our long walk through Petrograd. The Deriabinsky prison was at the other end of the town, near the docks. It had formerly been a naval prison but had long been disused, but since the Reign of Terror began it also was overcrowded.

We found life in our new abode much more bearable. To begin with, the rooms were very large, they could easily hold 200 men; there were plenty of beds and even little tables near some of them. In

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

the daytime we were at liberty to go from one room to another as they were only locked at night. We hardly ever saw the gaolers. We sometimes worked in the prison-yard, but the work was by no means hard. What we enjoyed most were the quiet, undisturbed nights when we could sleep peacefully. In the way of food we were no better off. We were given a liquid that was called soup, but looked and tasted like slops. The unfortunate prisoners who had no provisions of their own, or had none brought them by friends from outside, literally starved; I used to see them rummaging in the dustbin and picking out herrings' heads which they greedily ate on the spot.

There must have been over 2000 in that prison. Most of our companions were naval officers accused of a counter-revolutionary plot. There were also people of various categories and professions arrested after Ouritsky's murder. That event had provoked the arrest of crowds of perfectly innocent men who had been seized right and left, often for no better reason than Dr. Grusenberg, who had been arrested because the address of an acquaintance of Konguisser (the murderer) had been found in his possession. A member of the English club had also been arrested because, directly after the murder, Konguisser had run up the stairs leading to that club.

Although the prison regime was comparatively light we felt suspense and uncertainty for the future very much. There were no executions going on in this prison; those who were condemned were taken away to the Gorokhovaia, but even these cases were

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

rare during our stay there. There was, however, the case of an innocent man who was mistaken for one of the same name and taken away to be shot, while his namesake was set at liberty. But what did a small mistake matter to the Bolsheviks; Ouritsky's blood called for vengeance, and if a dozen more or less officers and 'bourgeois' were sacrificed what did it matter to those who had all the power in their hands. We heard of the officers who had been put on a barge which was subsequently sunk, quite intentionally between Petrograd and Cronstadt, and well do I remember the awful impression produced on us at the time. We were all considered hostages and our names were in the papers. We did not very well know whom we represented as hostages. We were really only a crowd of defenceless men whose death at any given moment would serve to terrorize anyone who intended to follow Konguisser's example. I thought an escape could easily be organized, but at that time we still believed in some show of justice at least and felt assured that our case would be sooner or later looked into and that we would be set at liberty. We were still inexperienced! Subsequently whenever entering a new prison I immediately set to planning my escape. The only question was which prison to run away from and whether it would be better to wait, or to run the risk at once. Prisoners, all over the world, are always kept alive by the hope of regaining their freedom. I had occasion quite lately to compare notes with a pre-revolutionary political prisoner. He told me that in his time

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

all his fellow-prisoners were always buoyed up by vain hopes of an amnesty, or some other means of release before their term expired. He told me about a prisoner he had known who cherished the hope of being amnestied on a certain occasion. The day before the expected event he said that he would either be free the next day or dead. He was not released and committed suicide. It is just the same now — all prisoners live on the hope of an approaching amnesty. The Soviet were very generous in this respect at the outset. Prisoners were a serious expense — they had to be guarded, housed and even fed a little, so they were unable to keep as many prisoners as they would have wished. The problem was solved in the simplest way — people were either shot or set at liberty. That year (1918) we all had hopes of being amnestied on the anniversary of the Bolshevik's coming into power. I laid a wager that not more than 10 per cent. would be released from our prison, my opponent betted that it would be 50 per cent. Only three were released, out of the 200 in our room.¹

¹ And that must have been a coincidence. The easiest way of regaining one's liberty was bribery. There was lawful bribery, and illegal bribery as well. The Cheka openly accepted money, its members took money unofficially. Some took the money and did what they were bribed to do, others pocketed the money and did nothing. The robbery that went on was appalling. Besides our hopes of being amnestied, we had other hopes. We could not help thinking that the English, when they saw and heard of the unmerited sufferings and acute distress of their former faithful allies, of all that was best in the country, would lend us a helping

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

As we had absolutely nothing to do most of the time we spent the day talking and visiting each other. The only events of the day were getting up in the morning, dinner, supper, call over and going to bed. Before we went to bed one of the priests, of whom there were a number among us, read evening prayers and on Saturdays we had evening service. Sailors say that only those who have been to sea really know how to pray. Those who have been in prison can be added to the number. It is not without reason that the Church prays together for 'those at sea and in captivity.' One day a man called Kroutikoff, who was in prison for robbery, attempted to express his opinion that praying was foolish. I told him to be silent, but he went on. The result was a row in which Iuriev backed me up. The next day Kroutikoff complained to the Governor. I do not know what he told him. Anyhow Iuriev and I were sentenced to spend twenty-four hours in a dark cell. We tried to expostulate, but the Governor very decidedly sided with Kroutikoff and would not listen to us. The day and night we spent in that pitch dark, damp and cold closet were most unpleasant.

During the six weeks of our stay in the Deriabinsky prison we met many different people there, as new parties of prisoners were brought in about twice a week. In October the Peter and Paul Fortress was

hand. But their point of view must have been different and I have not yet been able to understand it. In my opinion Leonid Andreev never wrote anything better and nearer the truth than his immortal 'S.O.S.'

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

cleared of its prisoners and part of them came to join us. We heard of the awful conditions they had had to endure. They had nothing but the bare floor to lie on and had been so crowded that they lay nearly on top of one another. They were all covered with vermin. They were only fed twice a week. The gaolers were exceedingly rough and brutal. It was only when they came among us, who were comparatively clean, that they realized the awful state of filth they were in.

Once or twice the Governor read out the names of those who were to be set free, we all listened eagerly in the hope of hearing our own names. He came more frequently to summon those who were to be sent to the Gorokhovaia to be questioned. We had been waiting nearly three months for our turn to come when one day in November we at last heard our names in one of these lists.

Once again we crossed almost the whole of Petrograd and at last reached the Gorokhovaia and the room N. 96 that we knew so well. We found everything just as it had been before, only a very obliging young man had replaced the old spy as foreman. He entered our names on his list and began asking us about our case. We remembered Ekesspare's naïve out-spokenness and were even more on our guard than we had been with the 'nice' old man. We proved right, as no sooner had the young man in question left the room than all the other prisoners began cautioning us against him and telling us that he was a spy, and that we must be very careful.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

After this we were always very polite to him, but tried to have as little to do with him as possible.

We were surprised to find our former gaoler Nevedomsky, the Governor of the Deriabinsky prison, among the inmates of N. 96. Less than a fortnight ago we had seen him all-powerful, shouting at the prisoners who dared to look out of window: 'Away from the windows, I will have you all shot!' He had been arrested for embezzlement and was now in a pitiable condition, having nothing to eat. When he saw we had some food of our own, he came up smirking and simpering and begged us to give him some. We did so, as we would have scorned to avenge our wrongs in so mean a way.

CHAPTER III

OUR FIRST EXAMINATION

THE long-expected examination was at last imminent. Iuriev and I spent the days in sleep. We had one filthy bed between us, but it was full of lice and bugs. We were up or awake most of the night. The room was stuffy and smelt of unwashed humanity, to say nothing of the neighbouring lavatories. We were much worse off than in the Deriabinsky prison. We were in a continual state of suspense and anxiety as to what the next day, or rather night, had in store for us, the probability of a death sentence hanging over us continually.

When we had been about a week at the Gorokhovaia Iuriev was sent for one morning at 4 a.m. I got ready too. His interrogation lasted about an hour and a half. He came back at last and at once told me all he had been asked and the answers he had given. He had been questioned by a man called Iudin, whom experienced prisoners considered to be one of the more merciful judges. At first he had asked the usual general questions and then charged Iuriev with having conspired with foreigners, at last coming to the manifesto (after several questions as to Iuriev's means for subsistence). 'Where had he got it from? What use had he made of it? Where had he had it printed?' This manifesto had been an excuse for getting up an accusation of counter-revolutionary propaganda. Ten minutes later I was sent for. It had been a mistake on the part of the Cheka

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

to let us have those ten minutes, I knew what Iuriev had answered and was prepared.

The Bolshevik methods of questioning prisoners were (and probably are still) very primitive and ruthless, their aim was to terrorize the accused. What is most painfully felt on being arrested is a complete uncertainty as to the future, a sentence of death being the most probable issue of the trial. We are always subject to God's will, but this uncertainty is deeply felt in Soviet Russia, and more especially in the Soviet prisons. There are only two possible solutions: release or death. The longer this state of suspense lasts the more painfully it is felt and the greater its effect on a man's mind. The Bolsheviks have taken this into account and purposely drag on a case for a year, sometimes two years. This protracted anticipation of death is fatal to a man's nerves, they are quite unstrung by the time the trial comes on, when he may easily be made to say anything that the judges wish. This way of acting on a prisoner's mentality has often been recommended by legal authorities, but to break a man's spirit, by continual threats of being shot, is a new and horrible proceeding quite characteristic of the Bolsheviks.

However, people get used to everything, even to the idea of impending death, so the Bolsheviks do not stop at this means of influencing their victims, but have other and even more terrible methods at their disposal; they draw out the agony and make the approach of death seem accidental and inevitable. The prisoner is placed in conditions that in-

OUR FIRST EXAMINATION

inevitably lead to his doom: hunger, cold, the absence of almost all the necessities of life including sufficient clothing, cleanliness, soap, fresh air; he is worried by the continual struggle to keep free of vermin. These are essential means to the Bolshevik towards the end which they have in view. But all this is nothing compared to their favourite method of striking at what is most dear and precious to all — a man's family. They take the bread-winner away from his family and oblige the family to provide the man in prison with food and they sometimes even arrest the wives, children and old people. Few can withstand this particular ill-usage.

To go on with my particular case. Ten minutes after Iuriev's return, an armed soldier came to fetch me. He led me along passages, up and down several staircases and through the kitchen. I remember noticing the work that went on there in spite of the time of day; the place was full of busy kitchen-maids, who were making cutlets and cutting carrots.

At last I appeared before the judge. He sat or rather sprawled in an arm-chair, his legs stretched out, his hands in his pockets. The room was very small, the walls were hung with maps. There was a table in the middle of the room and a lamp stood on it, the light being turned full on to a chair which was evidently prepared for the accused. It was here that I first had the opportunity of studying the procedure of a Soviet trial and their system of first bullying or frightening their victim into confusion. The

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

judge began by fixing me with a silly stare. At first this made me feel uncomfortable, but after a few minutes had elapsed his idiotic stare and the silly expression of his face amused me and I felt inclined to laugh. I also came to the conclusion that the chair was meant for me and sat down without waiting to be invited. Iudin here sat up, opened a drawer in his table, took out a revolver, and pointing it at me and still staring me full in the face, said: 'Do you realize what threatens you?' – 'No.' – 'Do you know what you are accused of?' – 'No.' – 'Oh, he pretends not to know!' I understood that their aim was to frighten me into confessing something and that they did not very well know what to accuse me of. 'So you do not mean to confess? Well, so much the worse for you! That leaves no doubt whatever that you will be shot!' These proceedings amused me, but at the same time I was far from sure that in spite of their having no proofs of my guilt, they would not be as good as their word and shoot me.

At that time the legal business was done in the following way: the man who questioned a prisoner stated his view of the case and the punishment he considered suitable for the offence, and then his conclusion was sent up to a board of high officials of the Cheka, who gave a final decision. Of course this final decision was a pure formality, they only confirmed the sentence and this sealed a man's fate.

I began by answering in monosyllables and showing no signs of the impression produced on me by his behaviour and words. When he had realized

OUR FIRST EXAMINATION

that I was not in the least affected by his bullying, he laid down his revolver and, with a would-be awe-inspiring grimace still on his face, took up a sheet of paper and a pencil and began questioning me more quietly. He asked my name, the date and place of my birth, the names of my parents, what school and regiment I had been in and what I had done in the War. All went well and I answered everything truthfully until he came to the question of what regiment I had been in (the Caucasian Native Division). I said that I had been in a cavalry regiment and had for some time been A.D.C. to General X. . . . This passed for the truth and I saw that he really knew nothing whatever about me and continued with added assurance stating things as it suited me. During this interrogation and all the others I was subjected to, I always answered truthfully, for fear of making a mistake and so getting muddled. I did not then know how many more times I would have to undergo such an examination, but that first time I instinctively felt that the best way with these gentlemen was to go as near the truth as possible and to draw my opponent's attention to insignificant details, to acknowledge nothing and so baffle the man into making him want to leave off questioning. In this first attempt I was successful. Not a word was said about my having taken part in the confederacy, or in the Kornilov movement, or the defence of the Winter Palace. He could find no real offence to accuse me of, and tried at random to accuse me of conspiring with foreign-

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

ers, of seeking help from abroad, as well as other crimes. But he soon left off this game and turned, as in Iuriev's case, to the bogus manifesto. Here he loudly expressed his indignation, tore his hair and shouted that he, as a Communist, would stand no jokes at the great leader's expense. As the final result of our word-contest the victory was on my side, my adversary had not succeeded in making me out to be a dangerous criminal, and I remained only an ordinary counter-revolutionary officer.

Iuriev and I waited three whole days in ignorance of the fate that awaited us, as it depended on the decision concerning our case. Three days and three nights we wondered: 'Shall we be shot, or shall we be released?' If we looked at the case from a logical point of view we were sure of being released. Prisoners were never kept long after they had been questioned. Banishment and penal servitude were then only beginning to be tried. The prisons were always being cleared of their old inmates, to make room for new-comers, and as I have said before, there were generally only two alternatives for the prisoners – release and death. But we, for some unknown reason, were sent back to the Deriabinsky prison! The likelihood of being shot seemed to lessen, but still the continued suspense and uncertainty preyed on me terribly. We had also begun to feel the effects of hunger as we had no more provisions left and very little food was brought us from outside. I remember the longing I felt for a piece of bread and a little sugar.

OUR FIRST EXAMINATION

We found everything unchanged in our old prison. Winter was coming on, the building was not heated and it grew colder daily; more suffering was in store for us. But we were beginning to get used to prison life, and death did not seem so near at hand. However, it is always the unexpected that happens and one day, towards the end of November, the Governor of the prison said to me: 'Bezsonoff, collect your things and come out!' giving the same instructions to some others. Here was another instance of a complete absence of logic on the part of the Soviet Government: that same evening, as I afterwards found out, Iuriev was released. Why? I do not know even now. He now helped me to collect my possessions and carried them to the gate for me. We bade each other good-bye . . . Many months later, when we met again, we both owned to the thought that I was about to be shot. Neither of us said anything about it at the time however.

About twenty of us were gathered in the prison yard. An escort surrounded us and we were led away. On the way we at last succeeded in finding out from some of the soldiers of our escort that they were taking us to a military prison in quite another part of the town. When we reached our new prison I rather liked it. To begin with we were all in separate cells, and I appreciated having some privacy after four months spent in a crowded room. It was very pleasant to have peace and quiet. Complete solitude, however, is very hard to bear. One of the first conditions of a 'pleasant' life in prison is

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

that one should be able to meet and talk to one's fellow-prisoners. In the prison I was now in the conditions were especially favourable. The doors of the cells were kept open all day long. We were allowed to talk to the other prisoners and even visit each other. We considered this life perfect. The prison had been cleared of all its former inhabitants before our arrival, most of them had been released, 120 had been shot!

We were a very pleasant party; among us sailors, several rich tradesmen, judges who had refused to serve the Bolsheviks, and a group of anarchists who astonished us by their eccentric appearance and behaviour and also by their strange want of understanding of their own doctrines. We were on the whole pleased with life in our new prison. There were no signs of any of us being destined to be shot, so we felt reassured and comparatively at peace. All would have been well, only we suffered dreadfully from cold and hunger. The prison was not heated, and food was extremely scanty. However, a change was in store for most of us.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION

ON 13th December, 1918, at about 6 p.m., we were told to get ready, as we were to be sent off and our destination was unknown. How we were to prepare, neither we nor our gaolers knew. None of us were properly dressed for a journey in the December frost. Most of us only had our light summer over-coats; my boots were very thin and the soles were nearly worn through. How were we to prepare for the journey? How could we send word to our homes or friends and ask them to provide us with warm winter clothing?

It was quite dark when we were led out into the prison yard, searched and handed over to an escort of soldiers. We were drawn up in marching order and started. We learned on the way that we were being taken to the Nicolas railway station and then by train to Vologda. We had no reason to suppose we would be better off in Vologda, but we all hoped we would at least be no worse off.

We were kept waiting two hours at the station in our thin overcoats in the bitter cold. At last the train was brought up to the platform, we were told to get in and the train started. I had never travelled in a prisoner's car before. The one we were in had been used, under the old regime, for convicts. It looked exactly like an ordinary third-class carriage outside, except that the windows were barred. Inside there was a corridor with five grated cages for eight men

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

each. There were ninety in all in two cars. We were at liberty to go from one 'cage' to the other and were even allowed to get out at the stations with a soldier to guard us; this enabled us to exchange some of our possessions for food which was brought out to the passing trains by peasants. This infringement of the law was due not only to the fact that the soldiers of our escort were also half starved, and that we shared all we were able to get with them, but chiefly to the feeling of compassion which every true Russian has for those in misfortune. Our escort consisted of simple Russian folk in whom no Communist propaganda, however strong, could eradicate this feeling. It is well known that the common Russian name for convicts is 'unfortunates.' It is this feeling that made the Siberians keep up the custom of leaving some bread and milk at their izba doors and keeping an outhouse open all night in case any homeless vagabond, convict or outlaw passed that way. Before the Revolution these same soldiers may have looked on us differently, but now we were no longer enemies, but 'unfortunate' human beings whom it would be a sin not to pity.

Our journey to Vologda lasted four days. I now realize that it was then that my prison education really began, the experience that changed my whole outlook on life and helped me to bear all the hardships that, by God's will, fell to my lot. And not only was I able to bear them, but I even succeeded in surmounting and getting the better of sufferings and hardships that had seemed unendurable to me a few

AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION

months previously. Up till then I had been an ordinary man of the educated class, over-particular in my habits and with an exaggerated idea of the *necessities* of life. By degrees, the life I was destined to lead changed me into a hunted animal, always ready for self-defence and prepared to struggle and fight for my life, with eyes wide open and ever on the look-out for danger.

We were not kept in a prison in Vologda, but lived in a house that had probably been a school. Whatever it had been before, it was in a filthy and disgusting state when we came to live in it. It was a huge building, but we were lodged in one small room with wide unplanned planks for sleeping-berths. At the war and in different prisons, I had seen many kinds of lavatories, but I never imagined that a whole row of fine rooms with sculptured ceilings and parquet floors could be put to such a use. Anyhow, it was the case here. A room was set apart for the purpose. When every corner of it had been used, another was opened and the previous one was locked up. When we arrived three rooms had been shut up and we used the fourth. What possible reason there could have been for this I cannot understand; the only explanation I can think of may be in the words of the *International*: 'Undermine the old world and build up a new one.' But I should hardly call that a way of building anything up.

Here I met a man to whom I am partly indebted for my new education. He had been in the military prison in Petrograd and we had travelled to Vologda

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

in the same train. He was a queer type, some called him Vasska to his face, while to others he was Vasili Alexandrovich Boiarinov. Although I got to know him very well I never found out what he had been before. He seemed to have plied many trades. He had been a tailor, a cook, a billiard-marker and even a day-labourer. What I liked in him was his being, in spite of his social position, which might easily have led him to join the Bolsheviks, strongly opposed to them. He showed his feelings pretty clearly to every Communist he came across. This is his account of how he came to be arrested: he was wandering about late one night in Petrograd. He was very much the worse for drink and suddenly felt lonely and inclined for company; so, hearing a motor approach he stood in the middle of the road and waved his arm. The motor stopped, Boiarinov opened the door and by way of starting a friendly chat asked for a match. The Chekists who were in the car and were returning from 'night-work' politely invited him in and took him straight to the Gorokhovaia. He had been in prison ever since. He greatly disapproved of our present 'lodgings.' When we left Petrograd he had hardly anything on, as he had given nearly all he had in exchange for food. In Vologda he very soon procured (how, remains a mystery to me) a very decent warm coat, and a cap and felt boots (*valenki*). He seemed to be quite at home in prison, readily made friends with the gaolers and seemed to inspire them with confidence.

After we had been about a fortnight in Vologda

AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION

we were sent still further north by train. The walk to the station was very exhausting, we carried all our bedding on our backs. The five months in prison had told on us, so that we found it hard work. The hardship of these five months were clearly stamped on our pale swollen faces and our eyes could hardly stand the glare from the snow. It was besides, very cold and we were all insufficiently clothed. Otherwise we did not mind; it was a change and a change might always be for the better.

Our destination turned out to be a station on the Archangel line. There was a church near the station buildings and a few houses, many of which were occupied by the staff of the 11th Division of the Red Army. This staff was very numerous, there was not enough room to house all of it, and there were cars and vans on all the sidings of Pliacetsk station. We were housed in a long row of dugouts, a hundred in each, surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and guarded by sentries. These dugouts were abominably built, there were no windows, no heating, they let in the rain and snow, while we had to sleep on the ground. But even here there were advantages; thanks to the disorder that reigned in the camp we were comparatively free to do what we pleased and, what was more important, could easily procure food. Many of the neighbouring peasants had been mobilized and were crowded in with us, so their families supplied us with food in plenty. Boiarinov was most useful here; thanks to him my well-cut summer coat was soon replaced by a short warm

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

padded jacket, and instead of my thin shoes I had a pair of thick serviceable boots. It was also thanks to him that we always had plenty of food; he even managed to procure game, which abounded in those parts, from the peasants; he used to roast it in an old caramel tin. But this was only on rare occasions, our usual diet consisted of fish and plenty of hot water instead of tea.

We spent Christmas and New Year's Day at Pliacetsk. Owing to the general disorder I never once went out to work during the whole of my stay there. In the middle of January we were again moved on still further north, to a small station. We were quite near the Front there. The Soviet Government is fond of softening the terms by which it designates its erring subjects, so we were now called 'those kept under observation.' It is too sensitive to call things by their right names: convicts are 'those under control,' convict prisons are 'houses of correction,' solitary confinement is 'isolation,' and so on. All the old prisons are overcrowded, so the Government has had a number of wooden sheds or barracks put up and calls them 'concentration camps.' Even the convict prison of Solovetski, well-known for the severity of its regime, is called a 'special camp.' I am not sentimental and prefer to give things their right names. So we *convicts* were now undergoing *penal servitude*. I can even now hardly bear to think of the dreadful conditions we lived and worked in; they could hardly have been worse. We lived in large izbas, situated in a row

AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION

with a wire fence running round them. There were no other buildings anywhere near, except a small izba for our guards and the station-master's house. The nearest village was 20 miles away. It was almost a desert island as we were surrounded by deep snow and miles and miles of forest. I lived there two months; it does not sound very long, but it was quite long enough for me to appreciate to the full all the beauties of Soviet prison life. We were again threatened with the possibility of being sentenced to death, were absolutely cut off from the outside world and our friends and we had also to suffer terrible cold and hunger. At the slightest hint of disobedience to one of our guards, to say nothing of attempts to escape, we were liable to be shot. A naval lieutenant, Voreisha by name, fell down one day while we were all at work and owing to the exhausted condition he was in and the extreme cold, was unable to get up. The soldier on duty ordered him to get up at once, but he really could not rise, so this worn-out man was accused of trying to run away and was shot. Neither letters nor parcels reached us, we never saw anyone we might ask for help and there was no hope of release. Worst of all we were completely uncertain as to the future, as nearly all of us were imprisoned for an indefinite period. And worse, even than that, were the cold and hunger. The only result of such an existence could be a long-drawn-out agony with certain death at the end. As I have said before, we were absolutely cut off from the whole world. There is generally a way, even in prisons, of procuring a

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

little food, a bit of bread; those who have nothing of their own are helped by their companions, but there was no way of getting anything, there was no one nearer us than 20 miles away.

This was how our days were spent: we got up at 5 a.m., and were supposed to have a pound of bread, a very small quantity of sugar and some soup. This had to last us the whole day. We really received even less than we were supposed to have, the whole guard being fed at our expense. In the evening we were given hot water and nothing else. At 8 a.m. we were led out into the yard, counted, driven into a cold luggage van and taken by train some distance away to work. The mean temperature for that part of Russia at that time of year is about 20° C. below freezing point, but it often goes down to 30–35°. These railway journeys were worse than the work out of doors, there being no possibility of moving, so that we were literally frozen. We worked till dark and were then brought back by train. We got 'home' about 8 p.m. We were sometimes out in the cold more than twelve hours at a time, and with no proper clothing. I do not know what the death-rate was among us in that God-forsaken, abominable hole. We were all more or less under sentence of death and could expect it at any moment from one cause or another. Several of us went mad. Most of the prisoners had almost lost the appearance of human beings, with their long hair, unshaven faces, dirt and vermin. During the whole two months I never heard a laugh or saw a smile. We had grown

AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION

apathetic, indifferent to everything and had only two ideas in our heads – food and rest. All the neighbouring cats and dogs had been eaten up long ago. The convicts stole and devoured them. It was only owing to Boiarinov's small stock of smoked fish that I was not obliged to have recourse to such dainties. I had made up my mind to keep up my health and spirits as long as possible. In spite of the bitter cold and hard frost I washed or rather rubbed myself all over with snow every day. Sometimes I got a day off and stayed at 'home' to wash my clothes. Boiarinov sometimes managed to procure a little food. On coming back from work we drank hot water; there were no lamps and no candles; the man on duty, who remained in the barracks all day, prepared dry wood for lighting purposes. Having taken our 'tea' we went to bed supperless, knowing that all would begin over again the next day. Death seemed to be creeping up, there was no hope of any change. The only way to get away from the horror of that camp was by escaping!

The idea of trying to get away had never left me and escape seemed quite possible. We worked near the Front – so the Whites could not have been very far off. Of course the 20 miles or so that separated us from the White Army would have to be walked and walked through snow which reached up to an ordinary man's waist; that could be accomplished, but before starting the direction in which the Whites were had to be known. There was no question of finding out anything from the soldiers, to do so

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

would almost certainly lead to discovery and death. Having been at the Front during all the War, I instinctively felt where the lines ought to be; but that was not sufficient. It would have been sheer madness to start walking through the forest, in deep snow and in the famished condition I was in, without a compass. I might be frozen to death or, still worse, come out in the Red lines instead of the White. My aim in life was now to find a compass. I used to lie awake and think of a compass, and of means of getting one. It became an obsession with me. I could think of nothing but compasses, the desire was stronger than my longing for food. Strange as it may seem, I was very nearly to get my wish quite accidentally. Our work chiefly consisted in preparing trenches for the Red Army. It was very hard to carry out as the snow lay very deep and we were obliged to clear it away before beginning to dig. The commander of one of the Red regiments who had been imprisoned for some offence worked in our gang. He enjoyed certain privileges and was not quite on the same footing as we were: he lived in the best hut, was seldom made to work and was never searched. He knew that he would not be kept there long. One day, while clearing away the snow, we came upon a live shell. This was a great event and the whole gang collected round the shell and began to express various opinions as to which direction it had come from, whether it had been shot by the Whites or the Reds, and why it had not exploded. I at once decided to take advantage of this for my

AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION

own ends and to find out, without arousing any suspicion, in what direction the Front was. I went up to the officer I have mentioned, because he was the most competent person present, and innocently asked him whether he thought it came from the Reds or the Whites. To my surprise he took a compass out of his pocket and said: 'I can tell you exactly;' after having studied the compass he said that it had undoubtedly been sent by the Whites.

My liberty was in his hands; I did not even glance a second time at the coveted object, but went on working as before. Now all my mind was fixed on getting that compass into my possession, and I was busy devising the best means of doing so. I rejected plan after plan. At first I thought of proposing that we should run away together, but I did not know him well enough to risk making such an offer. Neither did I dare asking him for the loan of the compass. I came to the conclusion that the only way was to steal it and escape at once. I began to watch him and noticed that he put the precious object into his overcoat pocket. On our way back from work I succeeded in sitting next to him and started talking. He answered very readily and we had a friendly conversation. I decided to try and steal the compass that same evening and run away during working hours the very next day. That evening I went to see him on some pretext and stayed to have a chat. He was sitting on the sleeping-boards. I sat down close to him. There were several overcoats lying near him. How was I to

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

know which was his? It was dark in the hut; I sat down on one of the coats and slipped my hand into the pocket, but there was no compass in it. I moved on to another coat, and tried another pocket — no success again! I was afraid of arousing suspicion, left off for awhile and went on talking. This lasted about half an hour. I had just sat down on the third coat when all my hopes were shattered at a blow. Fate was against me that day. The door opened and one of our guards came in to tell the Red officer that he was free, and might collect his things immediately, in order to catch a train that was soon starting! He did not wait to hear the good news twice!

I shall never forget how cruelly disappointed I was. Liberty had seemed to be within sight but now all seemed hopeless again. When I left that hut I felt utterly broken down and miserable.

*

However, another extraordinary coincidence awaited me. If it had not been for a chance meeting I really do not know when and how I should have got away from that terrible place. As it happened I left it in March 1919. We were at work as usual in the forest. A group of people came up the path we had made in the snow. They were unarmed; we knew by this that it was one of the numerous commissions of which the Bolsheviks are so fond. One commission inspects and verifies the work done by another and they are always controlling each other. There are more inspectors than people to do the

AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION

work. We were used to seeing these different commissions, so I took no notice of them and was going on with my work when I suddenly heard my name called. I turned round and recognized an old school-fellow. My first impulse was to go up and speak to him, but on second thoughts I decided it would be better not. It was he who first came up to me and we shook hands. Our conversation was brief:

'What are you doing here?'

'I am a convict.'

'Your profession?'

'A cavalry officer.'

'Are the conditions very bad here?'

'Yes!'

'All right, I will try and think of something to get you away from here. I am an engineer and am obliged to inspect the work done in the rear. Good-bye, you will hear from me shortly.'

I had not long to wait. The very next day one of the camp officials came into our hut and ordered all those who had been in the cavalry to register their names in the office. I knew that we could only benefit by this and persuaded some of my friends to come with me. In this way several sailors, infantry officers and Boiarinov (who had never been on a horse in his life) turned out to be cavalry officers! A few days later we were all sent to a veterinary hospital back at Pliacetsk station and were each given the important post of groom to sick horses.

I was not too delighted at this change; I expected the conditions of life to be much better in our new

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

place of confinement, but at the same time it put an end to my hope of escaping altogether and joining the Whites. We were going further behind the Red Army and escape would be almost impossible. The better conditions seemed very insignificant to me and I looked upon it as a palliative. I was anxious to regain my freedom and this move seemed to postpone this possibility indefinitely.

C H A P T E R V
A FLIRTATION

WE arrived at our destination late in the evening. I am a born rider; ever since I can remember I have had to do with horses and was, before my arrest, a cavalry officer. I am used to horses and fond of them; I even like the smell of stables, but when I first came to our new abode, in spite of having seen many disagreeable sights and smelt many disagreeable smells during the last few months, I felt sick. The whole place literally reeked of sick, dying and dead horses, and of different medicines. There was a thick layer of manure on the floor, our feet slipped and slid on it. The windows were tightly shut and there was no means of opening them. This was the place we were to sleep in, on broad shelves fastened to the walls; there were a good many of us, for we found a whole staff of grooms already in office. The first thing we asked them was how to procure food. When they heard how we had fared at our camp one of them went out and soon returned with the leg of an animal. 'This is for your supper,' he said. We did not at first understand and proposed putting some of the meat away and trying to make it last several days; but as we were very hungry we finally cut it all up, put it into our little saucepans, and popped them into the oven, where we did not keep it long, but soon took it out and ate it almost raw.

Our new work began next day. First of all we

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

took the horses to drink. They were tied up in their stalls by wire ropes that were much too short for them, and if one of them managed to lie down it was found strangled next morning. They were given water to drink only once a day. When we led them out by these ropes our hands were frozen, the horses were restive, and the wire cut into our bare hands. The stables had to be cleaned out afterwards, the horses being all crowded into a corner while we scraped up the frozen manure; this was no easy task. Then we gave them their oats, and last of all they were all led out for the veterinary surgeon to inspect. This lasted all day, it was pretty hard work; there were about 600 horses and fifteen of us. Most of the horses were suffering from the mange and many of the men had it too. I am ashamed to say that after several days in this hospital I followed the example of the others and began to ill-treat the horses. I had finished the cavalry school with a special mention for good riding and had learnt to make a horse obey me. I was capable of flogging an obstinate horse into obedience and might even have killed one that refused to obey me, but I was always good and gentle to those that did my bidding. But here I gradually became hardened and turned into the worse type of horse-driver, like others who had disgusted me by their treatment of horses. The very first day I was called to drag a very sick horse out of the stables. There were five of us. The horse could no longer stand, so two of the men tied a rope round its legs

A FLIRTATION

and pulled it along the ground, the others helping by pulling the animal by its tail. They took no notice of doors and corners, against which the horse's head and back were continually knocked and grazed, the skin being scraped off. When it tried to kick, the men only lashed it as hard as they could. I have seen many terrible sights during the War, but this I could not stand and walked out of the stables at the risk of being accused of refusing to work. I am relating the facts as I saw them, neither exaggerating nor diminishing them. In this case I only state a fact and do not know what made me so soft-hearted. The horse was dragged into the yard, put on a sledge and taken to the wood, where it was thrown out and one of our escort shot it. He did not even know where a horse's brain is and made several unsuccessful attempts before he finally killed it. What followed was also new to me, the operation was performed by my fellow-prisoners and all the dogs of the neighbourhood! In the present case the horse was a very lean one, so the dogs had the advantage. Only two or three men arrived on the spot with knives and hatchets and they only cut off and carried away the hind legs. The dogs got all the rest. I understood now where the meat we had had for supper came from. When a fat young horse was accidentally maimed and had the ill-luck to be brought to the hospital to be 'cured,' the poor dogs got nothing; all the prisoners arrived and cut up and divided the freshly-killed horse amongst themselves, and warmed their hands in the hot blood.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

In the evening we used each to fill our little pan with the meat, cover it with a brick and put it into the oven; in the morning we found it ready cooked. People who do not know what real hunger means hardly imagine it possible to eat smelly, badly cooked horse-flesh out of a dirty pan, but I eat it readily.

After I had been there a week I had become like all the rest. I also dragged sick horses by ropes out of the stables, cut up those which had been freshly killed and did even worse. When cleaning out the stables I used to beat the unoffending creatures if they did not move their legs away at once, when I ordered them. It was very wrong of me and I am ashamed to have to own it, but the fact remains.

When we had given the horses their hay for the night our work was at an end (we often did this last piece of work by the light of the aurora borealis) and a new life then began for me. I used to lie on my sleeping-shelf, cover myself, head and all, with my ragged old coat and begin to think and plan the best way of getting away from this awful existence. I lived on the hope of the ultimate triumph of the White Army. The idea that the British Army, that was then near Murmansk, would leave Russia without having obtained a decisive victory over the Bolsheviks, never came into my head. I firmly believed in the strength of the allies and looked upon the Red Army as a negligible factor. It was this hope that enabled me to live through all that dreadful time. I was not ashamed of being a prisoner, I was sure that 'our faithful allies' would

A FLIRTATION

sooner or later set me free, and I could then, with the clear conscience of a man who has accepted no compromise, hold out my hand to our friends and, being grateful to them for my freedom, join them in fighting our common enemy.

Besides these hopes the thought of escape never left me. This would be difficult, almost impossible from the place I was in, but the idea was always there. I was accidentally to be on the point of accomplishing my wish and an equally unforeseen occurrence put it out of my reach for some time.

The staff of the 2nd Division of the Red Army was established at Pliacetsk; the commander of that division sent for me one day. The message was delivered to me by the head veterinary surgeon. The commander was living at the station in a saloon-car; I had heard that he was a young pole, an *ex-artillery* officer of the Imperial Army. I waited a few moments in the waiting-room and was then ushered into his presence. I was proud of being a prisoner and introduced myself in the following terms: 'Allow me to introduce myself: ex-captain, now convict so-and-so.' We were both *ex-officers* and I think he felt rather uncomfortable at first. He laughed slightly and in a bombastic manner said: 'I am Ouborevich.' He then asked me one or two questions about my military career and at last said that he was going to transfer me to another station on the same line. There was one creature I would have been sorry to leave behind at Pliacetsk and that was a horse that had been brought wounded

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

to the hospital; it was a fine black horse, very strong and far from gentle. One night it had nearly killed one of the men who had tried to approach it from behind. All the men were afraid of it, I fed it and the creature was used to me and even fond of me. I asked Ouborevich to allow me to take the horse with me. So that same evening both the horse and I were packed into a van and sent off 30 miles further into the rear of the Red Army, to a small village on the railway line, where the conveyance department that supplied the army with munitions and food was stationed. This time no escort or armed guard accompanied me, I was alone and felt quite strange to be in this state of semi-freedom. It was late spring now. I thought of running away, but at that time, especially near the Front, documents were always being verified and I had nothing but my 'ticket of leave.' There was no sense in escaping further into the country and not much chance of being able to cross the lines to join the Whites. So I again decided to wait.

When I arrived at my new destination I found that I was to be lodged in an izba with two clerks, who came from the neighbourhood, and a man who was more or less under restraint as I myself continued to be. We were on soldiers' rations and there was no need to eat horse-flesh. My companions supplied me with some needful clothing, I was able to wash and keep clean and soon regained my usual appearance. There was not much work to be done and in the evenings we used to sit quietly outside our izba door. We had long conversations in the

A FLIRTATION

course of which, as I found out afterwards, we all four tried to ascertain which of us could be trusted to join forces in a proposed escape; we were always on the point of asking the momentous question and always held back at the last moment. Towards the end of the first month I could stand it no longer and asked them point-blank whether they wanted to escape with me to the Whites; they all joyfully consented and we decided to do so.

I was unexpectedly sent for one day by the station authorities. What the reason for such a summons was I had no idea. My only enemy there was a man called Detchenko, a Communist; he used to try and bully me, watched my every movement and was always telling me that it was time I left off being an officer. He was an awful blackguard, no good could be expected from him and I felt sure that it was through him that the Cheka had got hold of me and that I was to be questioned again and probably sent off to prison again. I came up to the saloon-car at which I had been told to report. The soldier went in to announce me. I was greatly surprised to see a woman come out to meet me and say: 'I hope you recognize me. You see my memory is better than yours, I do not forget old friends!'

I recognized her at once. I had often met her in Petrograd before the War. She was a general's daughter, had been married young to a very wealthy man, used to spend money profusely, was always very well dressed and owned a yacht. She, the true type of adventuress, was always looking for something

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

exciting, always anxious for sensation, never found anything sensational enough, and was always on the look-out for something new. The conditions of life after the Revolution exactly suited her temperament. When I was at Solsk with Iuriev we went one day to an 'evening entertainment' in our sleepy little country town. On entering the 'ball-room' I saw Nastia P.; her dress and manner were in sharp contrast to the provincial 'society' that filled the room. We had no money at the time and could not in any way entertain her, so I pretended not to notice her and she did not then recognize me. 'I did not expect to meet you in such an out-of-the-way little place. . . . It was not at all a suitable place for you,' I said, to excuse myself. It was a change for me to be in a saloon-car with this delicately perfumed, short-haired woman; it amused and interested me. She wore semi-masculine clothes. I noticed the cruel curve of her thin lips. She invited me to have some *real* tea; I had not tasted any for months and accepted with alacrity. It had plenty of sugar in it and was accompanied by cheese, sausage and biscuits, all of which I thoroughly enjoyed. We talked of the past, Nastia asked me how I got on now. I did not complain and answered all her questions in a bantering tone. We spent an hour pleasantly enough. When I got up to go away she invited me to come back to supper and added patronizingly: 'Well, you can go now; I shall think about your case, only what then?' — 'What then?' laughed I — 'Then you will be entirely in my power, to do whatever I like with.'

A FLIRTATION

She had on an evening dress for supper instead of her uniform as a member of the 'Cheka.' It looked as if it had come from her old store. There was neither wine nor vodka, the danger of being caught drinking was too great at that time. However, the good plain cutlets and macaroni seemed delicious to me. She told me that 'they' had just been to the neighbouring station in 'their' car and that 'they' had inspected something. Who 'they' were and what she herself was I did not succeed in finding out in spite of my repeated attempts to approach the subject. It was evidently distasteful to her to answer.

I went home late that night. The evening's entertainment had brought a little variety into my life, but there was no use dwelling on it — work had to be done, and my work consisted in getting away. The plan we finally fixed on was a simple one: we were to walk 20 miles in the direction of the White Front. We hoped that, as our way lay across two huge swamps, we could not easily be caught, as the only possible paths were known only to habitués of the country, of whom B — was one. But as ill-luck would have it the Bolsheviks posted a company of soldiers there a few days before the one fixed for our flight. Fortunately we found out about it in time. So that plan failed!

We then thought of riding along the road till we reached the Front and then running the risk of crossing over. This was the plan I liked best as it would enable me to take my horse with me. The

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

difficulty would be to procure horses for my companions; if we stole them it would be noticed at once and we would be pursued without loss of time. We did not reject this plan, only waiting for a favourable occasion.

Nastia came to see me sometimes; I introduced my friends to her, and our chief too and even my enemy the 'commissar.' She seemed to have guessed my designs. Our conversations were always carried on in a bantering tone, this enabled us to say things half jokingly that would otherwise have meant too much. One day she said to me: 'Well, Bezsonoff, I am sure you will run away sooner or later!' – 'I would run to the ends of the earth with you and with pleasure!' – 'Well, all I have to say is, take care! The shooting will be done by me!'

I had not yet been able to ascertain what post she held. She never told me and I could not ask her. I do not think she held any official post, but was, nevertheless, a prominent personage among the Bolsheviks; all the commissars were at her beck and call. Thanks to her, my position became more and more assured, but at the same time I had reason to believe that the Soviet authorities looked askance at her friendship with me, and that it made her own position much less safe. Our chief allowed me to accompany her wherever and whenever she pleased. The weather was perfect and one day we decided to ride to a village situated 10 miles from our station. On arriving there we went into an izba and asked for some milk. When we had drunk it and were leaving

A FLIRTATION

we found a sentry at the door; he told us that we were under arrest. It was no new experience to me; I was not overjoyed, but there was nothing to be done but to wait and see what would happen next. We found out from the landlord that a Red regiment stationed in the village had mutinied and that the leaders had just been arrested. I took care to get rid of one or two addresses I had on me and waited. An ex-bourgeoise and an anti-Bolshevist, caught late at night in the neighbourhood of a revolting regiment in the battle area, only able to explain their presence there by saying 'they had wanted to drink some milk.' — We tried joking about it, however.

'A very pleasant outing indeed.'

'What good milk!'

'What a lovely ride.'

We kept up our spirits, outwardly, but in our hearts we were far from thinking it a joke. At last two commissars came in; Nastia talked to them, they believed her and let us go. On the way back we felt really light-hearted and laughed and joked with a will.

I spent the whole summer doing my work, hoping for a chance to escape and finding a certain pleasure and variety in Nastia's visits. On one of these occasions she told me that she had used her influence on my behalf, had acted as 'bail' for me and I was to go to Vologda.

'Are you glad?' she asked.

'I am delighted, but it will not prevent me from joining the Whites sooner or later.'

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

So I went to Vologda; on my arrival there Nastia took it into her head to give me a treat and, through one of her admirers, succeeded in getting ten bottles of spirit. Before three days had elapsed, we had absorbed it all or nearly all; there was very little remaining, when the local Cheka favoured us with a visit and proceeded to search our lodgings. We were arrested and I was questioned the next morning:

‘Have you been drinking?’

‘I have.’

‘What?’

‘Spirit.’

‘You confess it?’

‘I do.’

The result was that I was only made to sign a promise not to leave Vologda, but could still live at liberty in that town. I certainly could not have expected greater consideration from the gentlemen of the Cheka. I of course lost no time in going back to Nastia and we went on drinking vodka. This time the town woke up. The papers were full of the ‘respectable, intelligent, interesting company,’ insisted on the scandal being stopped and on our being punished. A week later we found that we were going to be judged by the Vologda Tribunal. On the appointed day we all three appeared before the judges; they looked very solemn and important. We were called up one by one and asked questions like the following: ‘How much have you drunk and what is left? Did you ever drink before and do you intend to go on drinking?’

A FLIRTATION

What conclusion the Tribunal reached after these proceedings it is difficult to say; anyhow after half an hour's deliberation the following sentence was pronounced: 'The Vologda Revolutionary Tribunal, having heard the case of the prisoners accused of drunkenness, considers the crime proved, sentences the commissar X — to be sent to the Front for one year, reprimands the citizen Anastasia P — and sentences Bezsonoff, who is already under supervision, to be sent to a correctional battalion. But taking into account the revolutionary merit and proletarian descent of the commissar X — his sentence to be carried out only in the event of his repeating the offence.'

This was the end of my career as a 'repentant criminal.' When saying good-bye I thanked Nastia very heartily for her real kindness to me. I was soon taken into custody and, escorted by an armed soldier, was taken by passenger train back in the now well-known direction, north of Vologda.

*

I was exceedingly depressed and expected to find something in the style of the little station near the Front, but the reality proved much less dreadful. We lived in dugouts; these were not particularly comfortable nor was the food good and there was plenty of hard work. But all was made bearable owing to the man in command. He was a good Russian, no Communist, and had been a non-commissioned officer of the Imperial Army. He was very good to us and tried to do everything he could to make life easier for us, he showed us a good

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

example and all the men worked willingly. There was a commissar too who poked his nose into everything and spoilt everything he could lay his hands upon. But in spite of him the work went on well.

It was here that the change of which I have spoken in a preceding chapter finally came over me. I had got used to this way of life – it seemed natural to me to provide my own food, never to be sure of having enough to eat and a place to sleep in and being dependent on my own daily efforts, not to think of the morrow, not to worry about the future and to have a quiet and contented mind in spite of all the hardships to which I had become almost indifferent. This state of mind is usual with hard-working peasants and labourers, but is rarely attained by educated people.

The company in which I worked consisted of the remnants of two regiments nearly all the soldiers of which had been shot by the Bolsheviks. One of them was the regiment that had mutinied the day Nastia and I had ridden over to drink milk in a distant village. These two regiments had been formed of Petrograd workmen, they had been put into a train under false pretences and taken to the Front, where they had at once mutinied and had paid the penalty. I had been sent to join this battalion for no fixed period, and might have stayed on indefinitely if an order had not been received to disband the battalion. I was sent back to the village I had been in before, where I had met Nastia.

CHAPTER VI

ESCAPE!

IT is always the unexpected that happens! this is especially true in all that concerns the Soviet, where every department and every regiment and every region has its own rules and regulations quite unlike all the rest. In Fedorovo, as the village in which I lived was called, rules were conspicuous by their absence and I was able to do more or less what I pleased, there being no guard to speak of. My life there was not unpleasant. The Government took advantage of my knowledge of horses and everything to do with cavalry; it extracted what profit it could out of me; I did not cost much: I was not paid, and just received 'starvation rations'; there was not much likelihood of my running away as there was practically nowhere to run to. We were about 50 miles from the railway, not very far from the Front; the whole region was infested with Red soldiers and intersected by telephones. It was late October — no one would think of staying long in the forest, a fugitive would certainly be obliged to seek shelter in a village before long, and there he would undoubtedly be caught. Nor was there much sense in trying to run away further into the country without the necessary documents and passports, so they were more or less certain of retaining my services and left me in comparative freedom. I was, however, determined to get away in spite of the difficulties, the principal one being my ignorance of the exact position of the Front

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

lines. This may seem strange, as the position of the Front is generally well known, but this is not the case with the Bolsheviks. By asking a simple question about the disposition of the White Army I ran the risk of being shot. This is no exaggeration and partly explains why it is so difficult to organize anything against the present Government. The only sure way of doing anything is to pretend to be for them while working for their destruction and overthrow, but this is not my way!

I had quite decided to get away as soon as possible and tried to discover the best means of doing so. I began by making friends with my landlord. We were both very cautious at first and each afraid to trust the other. At the end of a fortnight we had got to know each other sufficiently to be more or less frank, but the presence of soldiers and other outsiders often prevented us from going on with the conversation when it touched on interesting subjects. Little by little I found out the disposition of the two opposing armies. We were on the left flank of the Red Army, which was holding out against General Miller's Northern Army. The Front was about 50 miles away. Of course there were troops along all the roads between our village and the Front. During the following week we became still more intimate, and at last I openly told him what my intentions were and asked for his assistance; he in return asked me to help him in organizing a rising of the local peasants. I of course consented with alacrity and we made the following plan: Fedorovo stood at the junction of the

ESCAPE!

rivers Mosha and Onega — all the provisions for the Army came down the Mosha and the principal road to the Front lay along the banks of the Onega and across a bridge on the Mosha. This being so, Fedorovo was situated on the main line of communication between the Front and rear of the left flank of the Red Army. Our plan was to destroy the bridge and create a panic in the rear, the Whites would advance and the whole left flank would be caught in a trap between the Onega and the Mosha.

The peasants whose corn and cattle were being continually requisitioned and they themselves having to work for the Bolsheviks, were all on the side of the White Army, and the half-starved Red Army would hardly be able to withstand a serious attack. I was sure of success and of being of considerable use to the White cause. We began to confer with the peasant leaders of all the neighbouring villages. All those I met were prepared to do anything to get rid of their 'protectors' the Bolsheviks. It was arranged that I was to have a guide to take me to the nearest outposts of the White Army and let the staff or leaders know how matters stood in the neighbourhood. I was then to try and muster a party of volunteers and return with them to start a rising of the peasants. The day for my departure was fixed and I had only to act.



As I have said before, it is very difficult to set any kind of organization going in Russia: people are afraid of spies and secret agents and trust no one. In

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

my opinion any conspiracy numbering more than four or five members is doomed to failure if it does not begin to act at once, so I acted without waiting for any further developments. On 16th October I left Fedorovo at daybreak. It was freezing hard and there was no snow. I wanted to take advantage of the three hours that remained before the time I usually began work, when I was certain to be missed. I had agreed to meet my guide in the next village so as to attract less attention and to compromise nobody. We had also agreed that the first-comer should make a small chalk-mark on the wall of an izba and wait for the other inside that house. This could be easily done as there were always men passing through the villages so near the Front. I arrived at the meeting-place first, looked in vain for the chalk-mark on all the five or six izbas of the small village, marked one of them and went in. I said good morning to the inmates, questioned them about the barges and when the next one was expected to leave and sat down and waited. I waited an hour . . . No guide made his appearance. I went out and walked down the village — no signs of him. I fully realized the danger I ran and that my life was at stake. I must say I felt very uneasy, I began to doubt my guide and these doubts did not leave me later on and spoilt part of the pleasure I felt at regaining my freedom. At last the izba door opened and I saw Ivan Ivanovich (my guide) come in. I had only seen him once before and now pretended to have nothing to do with him. He took no notice of me, but came in, asked

ESCAPE!

for a glass of water and went out again banging the door behind him. I followed him almost immediately. There was a distance of about fifty feet between us. It was a lovely frosty morning, the sun had risen, the grass was white with hoar-frost; we walked along the road.

'Everything is as it should be,' thought I, 'there is no need to suspect him.' But a new cause for misgiving awaited me. We had left the village and were walking past some fields, when I saw a soldier coming towards us. There was nothing unusual in the fact, we were in the rear of the army. I had acquired the habit of watching all the people I met, and looking at this man I saw that he was staring and coming to meet me. At that moment I felt convinced that I had been betrayed, was now going to be arrested and that the inevitable would follow. I stopped and recognized the soldier, who had volunteered to forward a letter to my brother. He spoke to me in a friendly way, said he was sorry not to have been able to do all he had promised, asked me where I was going, wished me a pleasant walk and went his way. Incidents like this were more nerve-racking than an open fight would have been. I cannot say whether he guessed whether anything was wrong, but after he had left me, seeing that Ivan Ivanovich was walking faster, had left the road and was now crossing a field in the direction of a wood, I waited a minute or two till the soldier was out of sight and then ran as fast as I could after Ivan. We walked for two or three hours over a frozen swamp; the ice

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

was not thick enough to bear us but quite thick enough to render walking through it very hard work. We were obliged to break through the ice at every step we made, drag our feet out, and break into it again. We were very soon out of breath, but were obliged to hurry on as it was important to increase the distance between us and possible pursuers as much as possible. However, there is a limit to all efforts and, in a state of complete exhaustion, we at last sat down to rest. We each lit a cigarette and started talking and making each other's acquaintance. All the suspicions I had felt before assailed me now, but, as I afterwards found out, my companion was thinking: 'He is sure to be a spy. I was told he was an officer, a counter-revolutionary, a stranger in these parts, but no sooner has he left the village than he stops to talk to a Red soldier.' My suspicions were aroused by seeing a revolver in his possession, besides the axe and compass I had been told to expect. Before leaving I had asked whether my guide was to be armed and had been told that it would be impossible to procure a revolver, and a rifle would attract too much notice. Why had I not been told about the revolver? I decided that he was a Bolshevik agent and was leading me to destruction. I had never seen a map of the district and knew nothing about the country, so I thought he might lead me straight back to the Bolsheviks or might shoot me and go and tell them that he had killed an escaped counter-revolutionary and so get credit. We were two vagabonds, but we both had a con-

ESCAPE!

science and it finally triumphed: 'He is a Bolshevik agent and will report me; I had better kill him before it is too late,' he thought, but said afterwards: 'But my conscience prevented me, I could not do it.' Having smoked and rested a little we went on, and the further we went the more my suspicions grew. The lake that I had been told we were to pass on the west bank we passed to the east, and instead of passing through a forest we walked across fields, in open spaces.

The crisis came at last. We suddenly came upon a Red patrol and found out that we were only 50 feet from a road along which a column of the army was slowly moving. Ivan Ivanovich at once took to his heels and ran away in the opposite direction. I felt greatly relieved on seeing this; one of their agents would not run away on catching sight of the Bolshevik army. We were not at all sure we had not been noticed and made off as quickly as possible. We were almost at our last gasp, but went obstinately on without a moment's rest. Things were changed, I trusted Ivan Ivanovich implicitly and my trust must have been transmitted to him subconsciously. I now took the compass and led the way. We went on till dark, when, if we were pursued, our footmarks could no longer be seen; they were very clearly visible by daylight, as the ice was broken and the hoar-frost shaken off the grass. The first day was at an end; we had about 30 miles of swamp to cross before we got to the White lines.

We stopped for the night and made a bonfire.

M Y T W E N T Y - S I X P R I S O N S

Ivan Ivanovich took a small kettle out of his bag as well as some food, we made 'tea' and ate some rye cakes. It was a real rest, moral as well as physical. Ivan Ivanovich, a true northerner, knew exactly what to do. He cut a log of wood in half, lengthwise, scooped the halves out, made two bonfires and covered them with the damp logs. They did not catch fire for some time and made the heat spread along the ground instead of going up into the air. We lay down between the bonfires and soon all the dangers, mutual distrust and unusual surroundings, were forgotten and we slept soundly, keeping as close to one another as possible for warmth. I for one was quite exhausted. The cold woke us up early next morning. We boiled some more water for breakfast, ate some cakes and started again. In spite of my swollen and blistered feet we walked fast. We walked for several miles along a dry path where our footmarks did not show; that was a great rest. When the path no longer continued in our direction we had to leave it and return to the swamp. I led most of the time. About noon we again came across some carts moving along the road and again hurried away into the wood. We began to doubt whether we were going in the right direction and were afraid of coming out in the Red instead of the White lines. My feet were frozen, and I could hardly move them, my will alone driving me on. Night was coming on. I had absolutely no strength left. Ivan Ivanovich took the compass and was leading the way when I suddenly saw him stop for a second and then rush

E S C A P E!

into the wood. I followed him. We ran with all our remaining strength, I was surprised to see him still capable of running so fast. When I at last came up with him he was trembling all over and gasping: 'The Whites, the Whites are there!' We had escaped on purpose to join them and now, on first catching sight of them, took to our heels and ran! I at last found out that he was afraid they would mistake us for Bolsheviks and kill us on the spot. However, we were within the White lines. The presence of a patrol meant that there was a village not far off and it meant also that we had safely come round the Red lines. I took the compass and moved on in the old direction. We began to see signs of human habitation, crossed a path near a stack of hay, came upon a fence, crossed a ploughed field and caught sight of a cross and dome; then the church came into view and the village. But what was this? We were walking on dead bodies – three Red soldiers, probably killed in the last battle (I wondered whether it was a good or a bad omen). We went on. I felt very happy and at the same time rather anxious about what the new life that lay before me would bring. We again saw some men in British uniforms; I went up to them, no longer feeling in the least tired; we met them and found that they belonged to the 6th Northern regiment. I explained who I was and asked them to take me to their commanding officer. Thank God, I was with friends!

CHAPTER VII

WITH THE WHITE ARMY

I was among friends at last. It must be understood that I have not the slightest intention of criticizing the efficiency of the Northern Army. This is only a record of my own doings, so I will only mention those events that concerned me personally or had any influence on my further career. I took a very keen interest in all that went on around me in the army, as I had lived on the hope of taking part in the creation of a new Russia. I have already spoken of the hopes and dreams I cherished during all the miseries of the past year. I firmly believed in the strength and goodwill of our Allies, in their sending timely help, in their discernment, tact and knowledge of the circumstances that had led Russia into her present plight, and was quite convinced that they would triumph over Bolshevism. I also implicitly trusted the leaders of the White Army, and believed in their disinterestedness and high aims and in the strength of the army; I thought they had kept all that was best in the old regime and left out everything that was bad. Well did I know the worthlessness of the Red Army, and did not for a moment imagine it could possibly be victorious. All the time I was a prisoner in the hands of the enemy, the thought that the White Army, aided by the Allies, was working at the destruction of Bolshevism, kept me up. I thought there was a vast plan that would be sure to lead to victory (this plan may still exist,

WITH THE WHITE ARMY

for all I know). It was with these hopes and expectations that I had run away and joined the Volunteer Army. I expected my poor little scheme for the furtherance of the general plan to be accepted with alacrity. All this I had fondly hoped for, but I was destined to be disappointed.

It is much more painful to me to recall the reception I met with and all I saw among 'friends' than all I endured at the hands of the enemy. Unfortunately I was first received by staff-officers and they were no better and no worse than most staff-officers. I honour the Russian soldiers and the unpretentious, subordinate field officers, there are none braver in the whole world! I honour all those who willingly went to meet their death and often confronted the enemy with no better weapon than stones. But I heartily despise all the staff, chiefs and leaders; it is they, not we who are responsible for all that happened.

The only pleasant recollection I have is of the first night I spent in the White camp. I was lodged with the regimental doctor. My feet were in an awful state, I was worn out and starving. I had a good meal, — the ordinary soldiers' rations amazed me after what I had been used to eating: there was corned beef, white bread, wine and cigarettes. I admired the healthy appearance of the soldiers, they looked excellent material for a fighting army. Having enjoyed my supper I went to bed, full of high hopes for the future; the unaccustomed feeling of perfect security and absence of anxiety for the

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

morrow was particularly pleasant. This feeling did not last long, disappointment began the next day. I at first took no notice and continued to hope for the best, but could not understand the distrust I met with on every hand. My plan of stirring up a rebellion in the rear of the Bolshevik Army met with indifference. This seemed to me quite extraordinary. I had run away from the enemy on purpose to inform them that the inhabitants of a whole district wished to surrender to the White Army and only asked to be helped to do so, and instead of doing all in their power to encourage this the chiefs hung back and did nothing!

Another unpleasant surprise was that I was suspected of being a Bolshevik agent or spy. This would have hurt me very deeply if this suspicion had not been displayed in such a ridiculous way; as it was, it rather amused me than otherwise. I was never told of these suspicions, but could not help feeling I was suspected when I was questioned and cross-questioned so frequently. At first I did not mind it much, as I considered they were right not to trust me at once without some proof, or at least until they had got to know me a little. What I objected to was their way of proceeding; it was childish in the extreme and they never seemed sure of anything. Instead of going openly to work, finding out everything about me and either shooting me as a spy and a traitor, or putting full confidence in me, and profiting by the information I had brought them, they lingered on and were pleased to

WITH THE WHITE ARMY

regard my having ‘wandered’ from one prison to another as highly suspicious. As soon as I could I went to Archangel. The Allies had left it. I had heard of this before, but had not believed it, as I believed nothing I read in the Red papers. But I now saw that what I had taken for Bolshevik lies was only too true. General Miller’s declaration to the officers of his army that whatever happened he would be the last to leave the country, kept up my waning hopes.

*

The Government of the Northern Provinces was short of money, the ‘bourgeoisie’ had plenty. I considered there was only one thing to be done and that was to try and persuade those who possessed abundant means, to help the army and Government, explaining that the very existence of the army was at stake; that it was their duty as well as their interest to do what they could for the men who were risking their lives for them. If they refused this appeal strong measures would have to be taken: one or two of those who might help and refused to do so, would have to be hanged, money would then be sure to flow in, as it did when the Bolsheviks took the Northern Province a short time afterwards. The ports of Archangel and Murmansk were full of unclaimed goods belonging to private individuals; it seemed clear to me that all ought to be sold, as the country was in need of the merchandise that was lying there and rotting. But the Government could not make up its mind to lay hands on private property. The Bolsheviks had not a thought for all the

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

people who were starving, and spent enormous sums on the Cheka and OGPU, while the head of the intelligence department of the Northern Army boasted of not having spent the whole sum assigned to him.

Neither did I approve of their treatment of Bolshevik prisoners: the best element of the Red Army often deserted and came over to us. If well received, well treated, fed and clothed these men would make capital material for the White Army. A certain number would inevitably have to be shot, but the majority ought to have been made much of. Here again our chiefs took half-measures. At first the prisoners were kept in custody, badly fed and looked upon as enemies; that, in my opinion, was the surest way of turning them into staunch Bolsheviks and taking advantage of the first opportunity of returning to the Red Army. This was almost my case and I considered it a shame that an officer, who had run away from a Bolshevik prison, at the risk of his life, should be so treated and suspected. It would have been comparatively easy to find out for certain if I were a spy; if so, I deserved to be shot; if not, nothing need be considered too good for me. The question of prisoners was a very important one and if properly managed might have resulted in the rising of the whole North of Russia from Archangel to Petrograd. However, there were probably many reasons for the non-success of the Northern Army and its following; it is not my object to expatiate on them. I had joined the army with the idea of

WITH THE WHITE ARMY

serving my country, and at first tried to do so by word and persuasion. I had seen the unity and discipline of the Communist party that had rendered it so powerful and enabled it to hold the whole of Russia in its iron fist, and I thought that if we wanted to triumph over Communism we ought to a certain extent follow their example and organize something according to their model; to unite all that was best and strongest and most energetic in Russia and to start an anti-Bolshevik league. The soldiers would, according to my plan, be in touch with us, and those of them who were considered suitable would be allowed to join us. There would be representatives or delegates of ours in the '*état major*' of the army as well as in all the staff-offices. The counter-espionage would also be in the hands of our organization. In one word I wanted to found an organization or party like that of the Communists, but with quite different ideas and aims. Many of the officers sympathized with me and thought more of the future of Russia than of their own immediate careers. We began work and perhaps something might have come of it if circumstances had not prevented us from carrying out our plans at the very outset.

I had been some time in Holmogory, there was nothing much to do there, and I was longing for active service. Towards the middle of February I left for Archangel. I drove all the way (a distance of about 100 miles) in a sledge. I arrived late in the evening, took a room in an hotel and, having left the Samoyed clothes I had worn for the drive, went

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

to see my friend Colonel Kostandi, who was at the head of the intelligence department. A man of principle and a born leader, strong-willed, intelligent, energetic and broad-minded, he was the victim of much unjust criticism. He was afterwards shot by the Bolsheviks. The moment he saw me he said: 'You are to go to Onega this evening.' Thinking it was some new appointment I said: 'Very well, sir!' He went out of the room and on returning said: 'Sit down and listen to me. Archangel is to be surrendered in a day or two,' and he explained the situation to me. Part of the troops on the principal railway line had gone over to the Reds. In spite of his repeated warnings no means had been taken for the defence of Archangel, the town was in a state of ferment, the local Communists were at work and there was no time to be lost. 'As you are a fugitive you run more risk and must be one of the first to go. There are several ways open to you, you can choose the one you prefer. The easiest is to leave on an ice-breaker, but it may not be able to get away. A surer, but more difficult way is to walk 500 miles, on the chance of being picked up by a passing sledge, along the sea coast to Murmansk; there you can join General Skobeltzin's Army. He will be able to hold out till we join forces with him. The intelligence department is leaving in that direction at midnight. You can go with them. There is sure to be a massacre of officers here, but I have friends among the workmen. All the others are going, I shall stay in command of the garrison

WITH THE WHITE ARMY

and surrender Archangel to the Bolsheviks. If I am shot, it is my fate.' I was aghast at this unexpected news. There was no more to be said, however; I bade Kostandi good-bye, went back to my hotel, put my Samoyed clothes on again, took some of my belongings with me and went to the intelligence department offices. They were on the point of leaving. I reported to Colonel Enden.

CHAPTER VIII

ABANDONED TO THE ENEMY

WE left Archangel soon after midnight. We were on foot, our luggage followed on sledges. It was pitch dark, there was a strong wind, it was snowing and freezing hard into the bargain. The Samoyed clothes were heavy and difficult to walk in, but they alone could keep me sufficiently warm. I felt sleepy after my long drive from Holmogory. I felt utterly hopeless and dispirited — all my plans and hopes were done for, crushed — 500 miles to walk in this weather and nothing to look for afterwards, no hope for the future. A miserable existence abroad at best, but more likely prisoners over again.

Our detachment consisted of the officers and men of the intelligence department and of other staff-offices; we had rifles and maxim-guns with us. The detachment was commanded by Colonel Baieff; Colonel Enden was with us and we were joined by General Baranoff. We must have been about 150 men altogether. Most of the officers had been together for so long that I felt an outsider among them, the only one I knew being Enden. I did not mind this semi-solitude so much, as I did not feel inclined for conversation.

After two days' journey we at last succeeded in getting into communication with Archangel and had news of Kostandi. He was expecting the Reds to take possession of the town at any moment and told us to move on as quickly as we possibly could,

ABANDONED TO THE ENEMY

as the Bolsheviks were fast advancing in the direction of Onega and we might be cut off. We were still more downhearted after hearing this; some of the officers cut their shoulder-straps off. We moved on very slowly. On entering a village the peasants were summoned and our commanding officer begged them in the most undignified way to give us relays of horses. This was done in every village in spite of the fact that we were well armed and had sufficient money and plenty of provisions! We very seldom got the horses we asked for and were obliged to go on at a snail's pace. All the time we knew the enemy to be steadily advancing and expected to be cut off at any moment.

At last, in desperation, I asked Colonel Baiev to let me and several other officers have part of the money and go on independently in our own way. He answered by offering me his place of command, I undertook the responsibility and henceforward led the detachment. On coming into a village I used to send for the mayor or 'starosta,' as he was called, give him a good drink and two armed men and say that I wanted so many horses at such an hour. I always got what I wanted and we now moved on at the rate of about 50 instead of 20 miles a day; but it was not easy, the roads were narrow and were bordered by the sea on one side and interminable and impenetrable forest on the other; the snow lay thick and deep.

Onega was before us, would we reach it in time? At last we were able to get in touch with the town

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

and heard that it was still in the hands of the Whites. We reached it safely and began to feel more hopeful and less depressed. Another 200 miles and we would have joined the Murmansk Army at Soroki. After that we would either be able to reach Finland, or go on fighting and defending the Murmansk Front. We seemed to have got out of the difficulty, the panic-stricken staff came forward again, shoulder-straps were in their right places and all seemed to be in order.

An hour later we received the following order: 'The main forces are retreating along the Onega-Soroki road, you are to wait in Onega until you get in touch with the enemy and cover the retreat of the army' . . .

This was as unexpected as it was unpleasant, but there was nothing to be done and no time to be lost. All the luggage, the staff and most of the soldiers were put on sledges and sent off in the direction of Soroki, while we, that is a handful of officers, stayed behind to receive the Bolsheviks. They were heralded by a small detachment of cavalry; we chased them out of the town and moved on, after our transport. We expected them to pursue us, but they did not do so and there was no more fighting that night. We again plucked up courage and went boldly and quickly on, the most difficult part of the journey behind us. It was bitterly cold. We had hard work to make our peasant drivers keep together and not stay behind; I had to get out of my sledge and keep them moving on all the time. We found out that

ABANDONED TO THE ENEMY

there were other detachments consisting chiefly of officers in front. Some stragglers joined us. We were nearing Soroki. As we were determined to get there next day, I kept driving on those who lagged behind. This resulted in my being told by Enden that my way of proceeding was very like that of the Bolsheviks. 'You could hardly have paid me a greater compliment,' I answered: 'all means are fair in war, but my conscience makes me draw the line at some; that is the only difference between us. A great deal of their success is due to their not stopping at anything to attain their end.'

We advanced with difficulty along the wind-swept road, it was snowing. The horses were utterly exhausted and could hardly move; my gray, which I had bought from a gipsy, refused to go on; I prodded him with a bayonet. I was very sorry for him but we *had* to get on. The worst was now over and rest in store for us.

Late that night we came into the last village before Soroki, and were surprised to find all the houses occupied and the village full of sledges. The inhabitants did not seem very friendly and answered our questions unwillingly. We met several officers we knew and asked them what was the matter. We learned from them that General Skobeltsin, who was in command of the Front, had capitulated to the enemy and himself crossed the Finnish frontier. The Bolsheviks had already taken possession of Soroki. We were about 1,200 men with artillery, maxim-guns and rifles. The Bolsheviks

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

had opened negotiations and offered us our lives, our liberty and property, in return for our submission; General V. had signed the agreement and our surrender was to take place the next morning at 10 a.m., at the Soroki station. I think this must have been the worst moment of my life; I could neither think nor reason rationally and was afraid to trust myself with fire-arms; it would take but a minute to blow my brains out. I silently handed my revolver to Captain Vlassov and lay down on the snow in my thick Samoyed coat and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

When I woke up next morning all the shame and despair came back and also the certainty of prison life beginning all over again. It was ridiculous to mention the Bolsheviks and an agreement in the same breath. Why not risk a fight? Why not try and escape? This last idea relieved my mind a little and the thought of suicide left me. I would try and run away. Unfortunately I did not do so. The frontier was 150 miles away; the roads and villages were guarded by Red patrols. I was too exhausted to attempt to walk through the forest in the deep snow. I honour the eight officers who started on skis and reached Finland. I heard quite lately that Colonel Enden also escaped that way. I honour him still more as he was in a state of great exhaustion and, owing to the lack of nourishment during the last days of the retreat, was beginning to suffer from scurvy. He was right in not trusting the Bolsheviks, as he, as chief of the intelligence

ABANDONED TO THE ENEMY

department, would not have had the ghost of a chance.

I can hardly bear to recall those days and will speak of them in as few words as possible. I got up that morning, destroyed all my papers, tore off my shoulder-straps, swallowed three glasses of rum, got into my sledge and went off to give myself up to the Bolsheviks. I no longer thought of suicide, but longed to die fighting. Why that ignominious treaty was signed remains a mystery to me. General V. had been very popular with the best type of army officer and what made him sign it I cannot think; but I will say no more about him; he was shot by the Bolsheviks and it is not my place to judge him. I shall show further on how they fulfilled their promise of leaving us our liberty, lives and property.

To go on with my own doings — I came up to the Red outposts, went into the staff-office, gave up my arms, having the pleasure of seeing the well-known types of Bolsheviks. Here the first point of the agreement was violated. We were all taken into custody. In our place of captivity the windows were all broken, in spite of the severe frost. We were surrounded by a well-armed guard. I knew well what to expect next!

We were kept in Soroki for several days. The Bolsheviks singled out the Generals and made them clean the lavatories.

CHAPTER IX

MORE PRISONS

A FEW days later we were taken by rail to Petrozavodsk. By the time we arrived there I had got rid of my state of apathy, all my energy had returned, and I only wished to get the better of the enemy, to triumph over him.

The local prison was not large enough to hold us all and I, with several others, was shut up in a former seminary, or clerical school, that had been closed by the present Government. We were obliged to procure our own food as we were really not fed at all. My former experience was very useful here, I knew the best way of bribing the gaolers: everything we possessed, even our clothes and money, was, little by little, exchanged for food, and our party did not suffer from hunger. A fortnight had not elapsed before the Bolsheviks violated another point of the agreement; we were robbed of all that was left us. Members of the Cheka arrived in the middle of the night and took everything they could possibly lay their hands on, including all the food they could find. After this, we had practically nothing to eat. We had no idea what was to happen to us. There was one thing I, personally, dreaded and that was being sent to Vologda, as I was known by sight to all the members of the Cheka there.

I was waiting for spring when the swamps would be dry and I could run away. But this did not seem to be my fate – long before the swamps had dried

MORE PRISONS

up, we were told to prepare for a journey and heard that our destination was to be Vologda!

When we had been there about a fortnight, I began to hope that I was forgotten, as no allusion was made to my ever having been there before. We were kept in a great concentration camp, surrounded by a wire fence, and guarded by armed sentries. We were hardly given anything at all to eat. We were made to write depositions and answers to all kinds of questions about twice a week. There were two young officers with us who were particularly bold and fearless, and when asked what regiment they had belonged to invariably wrote: 'H.I.M. Empress Marie Feodorovna's Chevaliergarde regiment' in full. They attempted an escape from Petrozavodsk, but having got to some impassable swamps came back and, strange as it may seem, were not punished for this escapade.

At the end of another week rumours began to reach us that some of us were in the town prison, and I soon got a note informing me that they were eleven in number. This was not encouraging, it meant that our case had not yet been investigated and anything might be expected. A few more days of suspense and I, with four others, was transferred to the prison. Five out of twelve hundred! That augured no good! This seeming ill-luck, however, turned out to be my salvation.

I will here make a digression and relate the fate of those I considered the lucky ones, who remained behind in the camp. A fortnight later they were all

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

taken to Moscow, kept there some time without trial and then sent off to Archangel to be sent to England, according to General Miller's request; at least so they were informed by the Bolsheviks. Instead of this they were all turned out of the train and taken to Holmogory, where they were guarded by Magyar prisoners of the Great War. These Magyars simulated the suppression of a mutiny, put their prisoners on to a barge, sent the barge into the middle of the Dvina, and shot them. That is how the Bolsheviks kept the third and principal point of the agreement they had signed. I heard later on of the same thing having been done in Solovetski and in other 'special camps' as they are called. As I have decided only to describe what I myself witnessed, and not to go by hearsay, I must here add that I have just spoken of what I heard only, but heard from many trustworthy witnesses.

*

We were taken to the Vologda prison and searched on our arrival. I was well used to these proceedings and had hidden my money, compass and pocket-knife. But as I had not expected to be robbed of my baptismal cross and some photos I had, I had not put them away, and they were taken from me! A few days later we were taken to another building in the prison yard where we were to be kept in solitary confinement, or what was supposed to be solitary confinement.

CHAPTER X

PRISON AND HOSPITAL

WE were led along a passage. There were cells on each side of it. 'Who is there?' we heard from one of the cells, followed by a perfectly unintelligible sentence.

'Would you like to go in with the felons?' asked the gaoler.

I answered that I did not care whom I was shut up with, so he put me into the cell from which the words had issued. The cell was large, with a tiny window very high up, under the ceiling. There was no lavatory attached to it. One of the three beds being free, I put my things on it. My new room-mates were sitting on the other two. I got to know them very well later on. One was a broad-faced, thick-set man of under thirty, plainly dressed in a blue shirt with slippers on his bare feet; he had a gold tooth in his mouth. The other, more pretentious, had on a military-looking costume and shook hands with me in an affected manner.

When they saw I had some food with me they offered to boil some water and make tea. I answered that I would enjoy the tea, but where were we to boil the water? '*We* will boil the water,' said one of them. There were two wooden stools in the cell; he took up one of them, and banged it against the floor until it broke in pieces. He collected the bits, made a bonfire in a corner of the room and put a kettle over it. 'This is the third that we have used for firewood,' he said.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

'What does the gaoler say?' I inquired.

'What is that to us?' was the answer.

The place was full of smoke but no one seemed to mind. We made friends over our tea. I found out that I was in very choice company. My room-mates were 'Fedka Glot' and 'Vasska the Cow,' the two head men of the Vologda professional thieves and criminals. They had been in prison some time, but had shown so much independence and insubordination when in the common room that they had been moved into this cell, where they showed no less independence, so that the gaolers had washed their hands of them and decided to leave them alone. Now, for instance, the bonfire was burning away in the most conspicuous way and no one took any notice of it.

What first struck me in my new acquaintances was their peculiar language. When addressing me they used the most ordinary Russian, but between themselves they spoke a jargon that was perfectly incomprehensible to me. It was the true thieves' slang, composed of Russian, Gipsy, Yiddish and Tartar words.

My recollections of the time spent in the company of these criminals are not unpleasant. It was all very interesting and novel. Our cell was the meeting-place of all the 'real' criminals in the prison. No one was allowed to go into the cells, but these professional gentlemen have ways and means of their own and consider that rules only exist to be broken. One of them used to engage the warder in conversation,

PRISON AND HOSPITAL

while the others slipped into the cell. Their favourite pastime was card playing; they used to play for anything they could lay hands on – food, clothes, stolen goods. They used also to barter, buy and sell all they had, these transactions also taking place in our cell. No convict dress is provided in the Soviet prisons, and the ‘real’ convicts are fond of ‘elegant’ apparel, and surprising costumes are sometimes to be seen when a man has had a piece of luck at cards; at other times they will go about half-naked. They do not keep their winnings long, everything changes hands very often.

I soon got used to their ways and got on very well with them. I began to understand their ‘music’ (as they call their jargon). At first they were very unwilling to explain the words to me, but when they began to trust me and knew that I was neither a tell-tale nor a gossip they taught me their language. It was afterwards of considerable use to me. While I was still in the same prison, but no longer in the cells, an amusing incident occurred to me. I was in the yard talking to some fellow-prisoners, when I felt a hand in my pocket. I struck at it, turned round and said in the purest criminal jargon: ‘Get away with you! The pocket is mine and no money in it – get along! do you take me for an outsider?’ I saw a pair of astonished black eyes and heard someone exclaim: ‘Well, brother, I see you are one of us!’

It was spring by now, the time of year when it is hardest of all to be shut up. But I did not notice that much now. Life was going on around me at full

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

swing, my companions were used to prison life and neither complained nor bewailed their lot, but made the best of everything. The evenings were quite pleasant, a large party used to collect in our cell; the rays of the setting sun were seen through our tiny window and we could also just see the sentry walking to and fro on his watch-tower. We and our visitors used to sit on our beds and start singing. Some convict songs are very fine when sung in chorus by convicts; they well know all the sorrows of captivity and the joy of liberty when it is at last regained.

The good comradeship and discipline of these thieves are wonderful. A promise is looked upon by them as sacred: if a man has given his word he is bound to keep it; if not, a way will be found of punishing him. My companions wanted to punish one of their band who had offended in some way; there was no way of getting away from our cell, but once a month we were taken to the bath-house, and while crossing the yard they succeeded in beating the culprit so severely that he had to be taken to the hospital.

In spite of our living together and being on very friendly terms, they never got to look upon me as one of themselves. This was only given to those who were associated with them in some common crime. I never pretended to be what I was not and they respected me for this. They never refused me a service. Whenever anything disappeared I had only to say a word to Fedka Glot and the stolen object was handed to me within the hour, to be returned to its

PRISON AND HOSPITAL

owner. Their stories of how they went to work were very curious and interesting.

*

It was through my new friends that I was able to communicate with my old ones and notes were continually being passed between us. I was informed that Ivan Ivanovich on his return home had accidentally let fall that he had been beyond the White lines, had been arrested, questioned and twice led out to be shot. This had frightened him badly and he had let several names out, mine among the number. He thought me safe out of the clutches of the Cheka at the time. Unfortunately this was not so; he had also given away several others, but he can hardly be judged very harshly for trying to save his life.

We were taken once or twice to the Cheka to be examined and one day the chief of the Vologda Cheka honoured me with a visit; he spoke to me in the passage:

‘Did you run away from us to the Whites?’

‘I did.’

‘Do you know what threatens you?’

‘I do.’

He knew as well as I did that the Bolsheviks had recently abolished capital punishment. It seemed hardly believable, but the fact remained; I had heard about it before and now my friends corroborated the news. I heard also that, on the night before the decree was made public, they had taken several motor-lorries full of people to be shot and had ended several hundred lives. Since then no more execu-

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

tions had been heard of; people were not taken out to be shot any more. I had found out all about it, and now being more or less confident that I would not be killed was indifferent to what might befall me. I went about and minded nothing; I knew my crimes to be very great, but whether I was imprisoned for a term of five, twenty or thirty years did not much matter; I knew there was no hope of being set free, and as I was not so badly off as I had been, the rest did not signify. As things turned out, my lot was soon even better than I had supposed possible under the circumstances.

I was offered the post of assistant stove-heater to the prison hospital. It was a capital prison was this in Vologda! The principal building was situated in the centre of a huge yard; the women's prison was on one side of the yard, next to it being the hospital and behind that was the building reserved for the worst criminals, which I had inhabited until then. The time I spent in Vologda was the best in all my varied prison experience. The doors inside the prison were kept open all day long, only the cells were kept shut. We led a life of our own like a small provincial town or village, with our own interests, gossip, visiting and flirtations. The principal meeting-place was the yard that separated the men's building from that of the women. It is true that conversations never lasted very long, as the warders were sure to put a stop to them, and intercourse was kept up by notes and signs.

The prison chapel had been turned into a theatre,

PRISON AND HOSPITAL

where revolutionary plays were often got up by some of the prisoners for the edification of the rest; the rehearsals were also excellent occasions for meetings and flirtations. On the whole it was all very unlike an orthodox prison. In my position as hospital stove-heater I felt almost free, only the grated windows reminding me that I was in prison; otherwise it was more like an hotel. There were real beds, tables and chairs, and the doors were open all day. There were five in our room: the doctor, the cook (a former dancing master) and two others besides myself; we were all political prisoners and were very comfortable together.

The food question is generally the most important one in Soviet prisons, where prisoners are purposely starved, as hunger is a powerful weapon in the hands of the Bolsheviks and enables them to get almost anything out of their victims in the way of evidence, information and accusations. This turns weak people into villains. This food question did not exist for us in Vologda, for as the cook was one of us we got practically all we wanted. We had meat (horse-flesh mostly), butter, oil, sugar, all kinds of things that not many of those who enjoyed their liberty at that time were able to procure. If I conclude this description by saying that there was a young nurse who kept watch over the hospital, instead of a warder, it will be clear that prison life can be quite bearable and in many ways better than Soviet 'freedom.' My work consisted in preparing firewood for the kitchen and bathroom; I was free

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

to use the latter by the way. I owed all this to my friend D-, who was head stove-heater and had chosen me to be his assistant.

One day on being sent for by the office I was surprised to find Nastia there:

'I have just arrived and the Cheka has promised me a treat . . . I shall be allowed to shoot you with my own hands!'

'You are rather late, my dear; you ought to have thought of it before.'

We sat down and started talking. At first she made unkind remarks about my having been in the White Army and on its failure, but afterwards we made friends again and talked very pleasantly. I felt she wanted me to ask her to say a word in my favour; but I was determined to do nothing of the sort and persisted in telling her how comfortable I was in this prison.

'Would you like a drink?' she said.

'That is the only thing I cannot have here,' I answered.

Before leaving, she promised to send me some vodka, but never did, as I did not remain long in Vologda. Soon after Nastia's visit I and all my party were taken to Archangel.

CHAPTER XI

MY TRIAL

THE difference between our life in Vologda and the Archangel prison was indescribable: we were kept under lock and key, maxim-guns were in readiness in the yard, we were separated from most of our companions and could only with great difficulty send each other notes, and sometimes exchange a few furtive words. Unpleasant rumours were afloat. The well-known Kedroff and Rebecca were said to be at work, and wherever they appeared there were sure to be wholesale executions.

We had not long to wait. One morning, on my way to the general lavatory, noticing that the warder was looking another way, I went up to the cell where Rakitin, the famous leader of a band of Volunteers who had raised a rebellion in the North, was imprisoned. I offered him some tobacco, he accepted joyfully and told me about his case that was just then being examined by the notorious Rebecca. She had promised him his life, whatever turn the case might take:

'I am quite sure there is no fear of our being shot. Rebecca told me so only yesterday and, besides, capital punishment has been definitely abolished.'

I went my way and he returned to his cell. That same night he and sixteen others were shot.

Our suspense grew, there was very little food, and no tobacco. There was but little sleep during the short Arctic nights . . . One evening two of our

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

companions were called out. They gave away all they had, crossed themselves repeatedly, and were led away. Someone was struggling and refusing to move in the passage. We heard a noise in the yard and flew to the windows. A group of about twenty men was being drawn up and surrounded by armed soldiers. But there seemed to be some confusion, the commander was waving his revolver. They called out to us: 'Away from the windows!' We were obliged to obey, and saw no more.

We found out next day that the soldiers who were to execute the sentence were inexperienced and had let slip one of the officers, and he had run away.

These executions were the work of Kedroff and Rebecca, whereas our case was being examined by the Naval Tribunal and this made us hope for a more lenient trial. But we were soon to find out that our hopes were unfounded. Three of our companions were former officers who had been in the service of the Bolsheviks and were now accused of organizing a rebellion in the rear of the Red Army; they were being tried by the Naval Tribunal and had no fear for their lives as they told us they were innocent of the crime imputed to them. On the day of the final trial they were sure of being acquitted and went off in high spirits. They never returned; they were sentenced to death, taken to the condemned cell and shot within forty-eight hours.

I believe this was the beginning of the wholesale executions that took place at that time in Archangel and its neighbourhood; I cannot say for certain, but

MY TRIAL

believe the number of victims could be counted by thousands!

Our turn came at last. The first to be called out was I – v; he came back from his examination very pale and rather incoherent, and we could not make out what the result of his examination had been. Gerutz was sent for next; he came back very cheerful and confident of a favourable issue of the trial. Three more were called out. At last it was my turn to go. The interrogation was carried on by a young sailor, a simple peasant boy. At the very outset I asked him in an offhand way to be so kind as to return the photos that had been taken from me: 'They can be of no possible use to you and I should like to have them back,' I said. He at once consented to look for them and began turning over the sheets of paper that constituted the case against me; this enabled me to see the papers and realize that there was not much proof against me. There were no photos and I gave the answers that suited me; I could truthfully deny most of the accusations.

After this examination I felt more hopeful, but still far from confident. When I was examined a second time I wrote down my own deposition and of course stated things as I wanted to, trying to be as brief as possible. Having finished I turned to my 'judge' and said:

'Tell me the truth, do you intend to have me shot?'

'Well, no, I see no reason for shooting you,' said he with a smile.

'All right then, I have given all the evidence I can.'

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

'The Tribunal will see about that.'

Was he sincere in saying that there was no reason for shooting me? I could not make out. The example of Rakitin was not encouraging. Gerutz continued very optimistically. I – v was very nervous and had become so confused with trying to prove that he was not guilty that he went on inventing stories even to us. We were eleven in all, Gerutz, I – v and myself were supposed to be the ones most likely to be shot. We could hardly sleep during the last night before the trial. I longed for something decisive, but the desire to live was stronger. I had decided to sit as near the window as possible during the trial, and if I were condemned to death to throw myself out of the window; they could finish me off if they liked, but there was just one chance in a hundred that I might get away. So I was prepared. I took a knife, a compass and all the money I had, put on two coloured shirts and had a second cap in my pocket in case I needed to change my costume. This was all I could do to prepare for a possible flight.

On the morning of the day on which our fate was to be decided we all met in the lavatory and pretended to be very cheerful and hopeful, but we three were far from feeling so. We were escorted into the presence of the Tribunal. There was a table covered with a red cloth in the middle of the room, a smaller one near it for the secretary and benches for us. The trial was to be public, there were several people present.

MY TRIAL

My sailor was one of the three judges, there were no counsel either for the defence or for the prosecution. The interrogations lasted about three hours, then there was a respite. All seemed to be going on satisfactorily for us. When the court returned we were allowed to speak in our own defence. Gerutz spoke very well, proving the accusations to be false. I – v got entangled in his proofs and became quite unintelligible. A young peasant lad, who had deserted and joined the White Army, delivered an incomprehensible rigmarole to prove his innocence, he had ‘accidentally’ walked fifty miles in the wrong direction; this amused the judges and they laughed. When my turn came I only said a few words and they were not much to the point, as I knew there was no way of persuading them not to condemn me, if they had decided otherwise. The court retired for deliberation. At first we waited in silent suspense, but after half an hour had elapsed and nothing had yet transpired we began to talk in whispers and compare our impressions. We thought all was well, but an hour passed and we heard the secretary go out and speak to the soldiers stationed in the yard. This made us feel less confident. Armed soldiers came in, followed by the judges; we saw by their faces that there was to be a sentence of death. The question now was, who was it going to be? They began to read the sentence, but I only waited to hear my name and moved to the window.

I heard the names of Gerutz, I – v and the young deserter, followed by the words: ‘ . . . condemned to

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

be shot. . . .' After this I only heard stray phrases: ' . . . 10 years, Bezsonoff, 5 years, amnesties. . . '

Gerutz was very pale, but in a steady voice and reasoned words was trying to prove that, according to the agreement signed by General V., they had no right to execute him. I - v was crying and wringing his hands. The deserter K - v's hair stood on end; this is no exaggeration, it literally stood on end - sticking out in all directions! The soldiers came up to those three and pointing their bayonets at them drove them into a corner. The sight was revolting; I turned my eyes away but did not move from my place. The three men were led away. . . . 'You will have your passport in a few minutes; you are free,' said my sailor.

My mind was not quite clear, I had understood that I was going to live; but the faces of those three and now these words about freedom! what did it all mean? I at last made out that I was really free! I had been prepared for anything, but had not expected freedom. It turned out that five out of the eleven of us had been sentenced to imprisonment for a certain number of years, but these terms were covered by amnesties which had recently been promulgated and we were free!

A few minutes later I was in the street, at liberty to do whatever I chose. I must say I felt very queer and could not make out my feelings, could not realize the truth. The shadow of death seemed to be still over me. But this did not last long; I soon began to experience a gladness and joy that it is diffi-

MY TRIAL

cult to describe — a joy that can only be understood by those who have been given back to life as I was that day — all I can now say is that it is a pity that feelings like those do not last long; ordinary everyday life soon wears off the exultation and thankfulness. But that first night we, that is, myself and another of the five, with whom I had gone to some friends who lived in Archangel, were perfectly and unreservedly happy, and enjoyed and realized our happiness to the full.

We had to be cautious, though, as cases of arrest and subsequent execution after acquittal were not unknown; so the very next day I went, rather unwillingly, it must be confessed, and got a permit to leave Archangel. Without loss of time I took the first available train and started for the Front. Being now a free citizen of Soviet Russia, I was mobilized for military service; the fact was stated on my passport; there was no way out of it. The Soviets were then at war with Poland and I would be obliged to join the Red Army, near Smolensk.

Many of the places I saw on the line were familiar to me. We passed the little siding station, the scene of my period of hard labour, Pliacetsk; all these sights brought back many unpleasant recollections, many baffled hopes, but that was all in the past. Life lay before me, and with it hope for the future.

CHAPTER XII

OUTLAWED

I WAS tired of adventures, prisons, escapes, trials, fighting. I wanted to hear no more of either Whites, Reds, or Poles. I had had enough of them all.

But what was I to do? I knew that there was nothing easier than to accept a post from the Government; as a former officer I was sure to be offered a more or less responsible one very soon. This I was determined not to accept.

I stopped before reaching the Front, near Polotsk. I had to do something and undertook the supervision of horses destined for the army. I must say here that at that time I wholeheartedly hated and despised all the Russian peasantry; I attributed all the evils of the Revolution to them; I only saw *their* mistakes and faults and overlooked those of my own class. I was fully persuaded that the Russian peasant was, morally and intellectually, far below me and those I considered my equals. The thought that he was now my master was unbearable to me, and I longed to avenge all my self on every peasant I came across. This desire for revenge very nearly cost me my life.

My duties consisted in inspecting and passing the horses for the army, and in superintending the depot where they were kept before being sent to the Front. All the grooms were my subordinates. I was all-powerful in that depot, and kept them under the

O U T L A W E D

severest discipline. At the same time, I never concealed the fact that I had been in the White Army. The grooms, dissatisfied with my treatment of them, joined the commissar attached to the depot in trying to bring an accusation against me. They could find nothing to complain of in my work; I knew my business thoroughly, and was very conscientious, so they decided to rake up my anti-revolutionary activities.

In May 1920 I was ordered to appear before the Vitebsk Revolutionary Tribunal and heard that I was accused of having been a 'White' spy, and of having questioned, beaten and shot prisoners. I answered that my case had been examined by the Archangel Naval Tribunal and that I had been acquitted.

'There is a new case against you, and we are going to look into it,' they said. I was arrested and shut up in the Vitebsk prison. This was my longed-for rest! The affair looked serious. One of the grooms had declared that he had been a prisoner in the White Army and had seen me at work there. My word was set at nought, only the 'proletarian' was believed.

I was now certain that my time had come. But it did not seem to be God's will and I was saved. I noticed, when I was being questioned a second time, that the groom's accusations related to the spring of 1919, when I was in the veterinary hospital at Pliacetsk, and that I could easily plead an *alibi*. But how was I to prove it? I remembered having seen

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

a young veterinary student at the depot, who had been at Pliacetsk with me. Luckily for me, he was a Communist. How was I to get in touch with him? Here my acquaintance with criminals and their language came to my rescue; I wrote a note and it was delivered.

At the trial I again sat on a bench before a red table. As usual I tried to take things into my own hands, and at once began to mention dates. My accuser turned as pale as a sheet. The court asked for proofs, I cited B – as a reference; he was called up and questioned. He took out his ticket of membership of the Communist Party and affirmed that in the spring of 1919 I could not possibly have been in the White camp as he knew for a certainty that I was well beyond the Red lines. The court believed him and went away to deliberate. I was saved; my accuser seemed to have grown suddenly thinner. He was afraid of being accused in his turn, of calumny; but the court decided otherwise. Strange as it may seem they did not return at all, no sentence was read; the secretary quietly handed me my passport and told me that I was free; that was all.

Having once more regained my freedom I decided to go without loss of time to Petrograd. This was more easily planned than done, as I now found out that, as an ex-cavalry officer, I was destined for the Front. The two officers at the head of the Red Cavalry were determined to drag me in with them; they were both on the high road to brilliant military careers. They began by offering me the command

O U T L A W E D

of a cavalry regiment. I refused this offer; they became more insistent. I was quite determined not to accept, I knew that if I once gave in I was lost; I would be in the hands of the Bolsheviks, and would be obliged to do their bidding, whatever they set me to do. It was all-important to concede nothing at the outset, and to remain an obscure nobody, or, if necessary, an outlaw.

My struggle with the cavalry authorities continued, I was trying to gain time. I had decided to simulate an illness and get leave to go to Petrograd for the sake of my health. Unfortunately I was perfectly well, and could think of nothing plausible for the medical commission. Luckily I had broken a gold tooth in my mouth, and so I began to trade on it. There were lady-dentists attached to the medical board. I presented them with several bouquets of flowers; they inspected my teeth and gave me a certificate. This was accepted by the medical commission, and I obtained an order for evacuation. I had just succeeded in getting it when the cavalry inspector told me that all was ready and I was to leave the next day for the Front where I was to command a cavalry regiment.

'Excuse me,' I said, 'I am leaving to-morrow for Petrograd. I have an order for my evacuation and am leaving for reasons of health.'

The man was furious, but could do nothing, the commission's order could not be disregarded.

I had gained my point. I invested all the money I had, in seven sucking pigs, packed them in two

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

baskets, and, with them as my sole capital, started for Petrograd, to begin life afresh.

*

My pigs and I travelled 1st class. Would I succeed in carrying them out of the station and avoiding their confiscation? I shouldered the baskets and, pretending they were very light, moved briskly along the platform. Just as I was nearing the sentries I noticed that my coat was wet through. At that moment I thought all was lost and I was ruined, but luck was on my side — I met a porter whom I knew well. In the old days he had often carried my luggage for me and I had always paid him well. I went up to him and begged him to carry my pigs past the sentries.

*

I hardly recognized Petrograd when I came out into the streets. The pavement was all up; it was dark; the streets were deserted. I walked to a friend's house and was most hospitably received.

I now began life in earnest. The education I had received in Bolshevik prisons was useful to me now, they had succeeded in making me a worthy pupil. I was now going to fight for my life and my living; my prison experience had strengthened me and made me indifferent to most things and not over particular as to ways and means.

All my property consisted of the seven pigs and what clothes I stood up in. I concocted and wrote myself a passport that would enable me to live in Petrograd unmolested, and had it legalized. Accord-

O U T L A W E D

ing to my passport I was now a demobilized clerk, a native of Petrograd, and had never had anything to do with the army, had never been on trial, never been to prison.

My pigs were soon all sold. I had to find some other way of getting money. Before leaving for the Front in 1914, I had left all my furniture and belongings in a warehouse; I now decided to go and find out if they still existed. I found a heap of photos and a looking-glass; I took the photos and went off with a light heart!

CHAPTER XIII

'BUSINESS' IN EARNEST

THE question of how to gain my livelihood was now before me. There were several solutions. The first and most obvious was to seek Government employment, but there were two objections to this: in the first place it was against my principles to work for the Bolsheviks, and in the second it would mean having to flatter and make up to every kind of scoundrel, who might happen to be my superior. I could perhaps stand this for a few weeks, but one fine day I would be sure to explode and might come to a very sad end. So this solution did not do.

I might take to trade, sell things for my friends, of whom I still had a good number in Petrograd, and sell them at a profit to myself, but I did not like the idea of trading on my friends' ignorance of prices. This would not do either.

The only way out of the difficulty was to trample on all laws, human and divine, and take to robbery. The Bolsheviks had abolished all laws, and made new ones of their own, so I thought there would be no harm in trying to rob them of their stolen goods. I am positive that there is no one living in Soviet Russia who has not broken one or other of their laws at some time.

I made up my mind to see what I could do to outwit the enemy. I was again living with my friend Iuriev. We decided to wait for some chance to come our way. One day he told me about a man he knew

'BUSINESS' IN EARNEST

who was clerk in a Government commissariat department, and whom he had sounded. We invited him to dinner. At times we had nothing to buy any tobacco with, but on this occasion we gave our guest a sumptuous meal, with plenty of wine and vodka, game, ices, and had a real waiter. Towards the end of dinner 'Petia' was ready for anything. We asked him if he was willing to help us. He said 'Yes!' We shook hands on it. Our plan was complicated and its elaboration took us some time. We wanted to get some of the clerks of that department to come and do some overtime work on several consecutive Sundays; a few but not too many. We were to act on the day there was a large sum of money in the safe, not too many clerks present, and the cashier with his keys available. All this needed time and careful preparation. We were determined to succeed and went on with our arrangements. The office-building was large, the safe was in a small room on the first floor, at the end of a long passage. Iuriev and myself had been in and out several times, pretending to be on business, to see how the land lay. We knew the exact disposition of the doors, gate, yard, back-yard, staircase and safe. We knew the cashier by sight and had decided where a car was to wait for us. The choice of a reliable chauffeur had been one of our chief difficulties, we had to find a man on whom we could depend and also a reliable car. If we played such a dangerous game we had to leave as little as possible to chance.

At last all was decided, Petia was to meet us at

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

11 a.m., with some papers in his hand, at a corner of the corridor; that would mean that everything was all right; the cashier with his keys in his place. If Petia was there without his papers, it would mean that there was a hitch in the proceedings and we might wait; his absence would mean that all was lost and that it was no good beginning. It was fixed for next Sunday. On Friday afternoon I went to see Petia and after a few moments' talk he suddenly mumbled:

'I do not know what to do; I am afraid; you can call me what names you like. I cannot do it.'

I tried to make him change his mind, he went on mumbling: 'I am a coward, I am a villain, I am not to be depended on; but I can't do it.'

I tried persuasion, tried frightening him, but all he could say was that he would not do it and would not come to work on Sunday. I was perfectly furious: I had staked everything on the success of this plan. I felt incapable of beginning anything else.

That night I felt I must win; I could not sleep; I even prayed for success (I did not understand Christ's teaching then). I thought I was right; I was trying to earn my living; I was trying to rob the Bolsheviks, who had robbed so many others. My conscience seemed clear and I did not think I was doing anything wrong. When morning came I had quite decided I would do it. I called Iuriev and told him that he was to go at once and get me another clerk from the same office; he came back

'BUSINESS' IN EARNEST

with one he knew very slightly. I asked the newcomer point-blank:

'Do you want to earn millions?'

'What do you want me to do?'

I told him our plan and what he had to do in 'Petia's' place. I had bought him.

On Sunday morning we went out at ten o'clock. The car did not come for us; we wanted to attract as little notice as possible. On coming up to the building we found our chauffeur in readiness, his number plate spattered all over with mud. On seeing us he set his machine going. We went in. It was three minutes to eleven. We went up the staircase. At the last moment I felt an unaccountable lassitude and wanted to give it all up. But it was too late now; I took myself well in hand and went on. My energy returned in a moment. We moved along the passage, our caps pulled over our faces, our collars up. We saw our accomplice coming to meet us, papers in hand, all was well. We went slowly on, into the little room, shut the door after us and went up to the cashier.

'Are you the cashier?'

'Yes.'

'Kindly tell us . . .' We came close up to him and pointed our revolvers at his head.

'Open your safe!'

He felt there was no way out of it, but did not obey at once.

'Open the safe!'

His hands trembled as he chose the right key and

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

opened the heavy door. Inside there were many bundles of bank-notes on shelves. I was in a hurry to get away, but forced myself to stand motionless over the cashier while Iuriev took out the packets of bank-notes and put them in bags.

'Is that all you have?'

I began to feel sorry for the man.

'Stay here quietly for a quarter of an hour! Come along!'

We took up the bags, locked the door after us and carried the key off. It was hard to keep from running. I felt for my revolver. . . . At last we were out in the street, had gone through the yard and out at the back gate. The car was waiting, we got in, the chauffeur started and we were soon driving away at top speed, our clothes were changed, the key thrown away and the deed was done!

The same evening Petia got his part of the gains.

'What does this mean? Did you do it after all? Do you really mean it? I don't believe it!'

'Here is your share.'

Two months later the cashier received a packet of bank-notes. He accepted. We found out that he had got off with a fright and two interrogations.

*

This money lasted us some time. When it was all gone we had to begin over again. We decided to do some 'business' in Moscow this time. It was a Soviet warehouse we had in view. Getting the necessary documents and orders into our hands took a lot of time and trouble; at last we had all we wanted;

'BUSINESS' IN EARNEST

all the papers were duly signed and we went with a motor-lorry to get the flour for which we had an 'order.' We took it, without loss of time, to another warehouse, which also belonged to the Government, and sold it as our own; the transaction had been arranged beforehand and we had offered the flour at a very low price. We were now paid for it. We pocketed the money and went back to Petrograd.

'REVELRY'

I WAS playing a risky game, but the excitement kept me up to the mark. The least mistake and all would be over. The 'business' was engrossing and demanded all my energy and plenty of patience besides. I was not successful every time; nothing came of several attempts, but these failures only made me more anxious to succeed and to be more careful next time. At that time I thought there was no harm in what I was doing. I loved my country and had done all in my power for her. It was clear that many of those who talked loudly about saving Russia, only thought of themselves. I was disillusioned and had decided to live for myself and those who were my friends. I sometimes had misgivings, but on the whole only thought of enjoying myself and gaining sufficient means for a pleasant life.

I had many passports, every one of which described me as belonging to a different profession. I thought nothing of getting what I could out of the Bolsheviks.

It was early spring. My chief aim in life was to have a good time. I was walking down the Nevsky one day. Petrograd was like a great village; nearly all the people I met I knew by sight. It was a lovely day. A well-dressed young woman was coming in my direction, her magnificent sable boa attracted my notice and I wanted to know who she was. She smiled, and I noticed something peculiar about her

'REVELRY'

teeth — one of them was a real diamond! At that moment our looks met and we recognized each other; I had known her as an attractive school-girl some years before the War. But the priceless sable and the diamond tooth were bad signs. 'She must be in the Cheka,' I thought, 'I will pretend not to recognize her.' But it was too late, she came up to me and asked whether I remembered her.

A minute later I was walking beside her, and she was telling me about herself: 'Mother and I were alone, we were badly off, we let rooms, my present husband was one of our lodgers; he owns the biggest fur-store in the country; he is enormously rich.' At any rate she was not in the Cheka.

'How do you like your new surroundings?'

'Oh, I am used to it all now; I have plenty of clothes and all I can possibly wish for. I am having a good time; you must come and see me. Come on Wednesday evening, you will see what curious company I keep.'

I had no evening clothes, but decided to go to this entertainment. It was 10 p.m. when I arrived and rang the bell. A small window was opened in the massive door and I saw an eye peering at me; then the window was closed and a man's voice said:

'Verochka, there is a stranger there, can it be your new friend?'

The window was reopened and I saw another eye peep out, then the huge iron-bound door was unlocked and opened. Verochka was there, her costly dress trimmed all over with chinchilla. She intro-

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

duced me to her husband, who was dressed in the most irreproachable evening clothes. 'What a pity! if I had known you had no evening coat I would have sent you all you wanted.' This was his greeting; I looked helplessly at Verochka, she blushed very slightly, she was probably used to her husband's ways.

'Oh leave him alone, you with your evening clothes. Come in!'

I ought to have gone away at once, but curiosity held me. I was the first arrival and the master of the house did his best to entertain me, he took me all over his suite of rooms and showed everything off: pictures that had been paid for by the yard, ugly and expensive ornaments he had bought in basketfuls; his new billiard-table. He seemed delighted with his new acquisitions and told me how much he had paid for each.

The guests began to appear. All the women wore huge diamonds, their husbands wore surprisingly perfect clothes. Up till then I had thought that Russia was divided into two camps, Bolsheviks and non-Bolsheviks, and that all who were not Bolsheviks understood each other; I was now to learn that there existed a third group. I had been able to get on with criminals, but here I felt absolutely and completely out of it and was incapable of saying a single word. Their conversation centred principally on what had been paid for all they possessed; the women spoke of the fabulous prices they had given for their shoes, stockings, dresses. The men boasted to each other of the enormous sums they had paid for their lodg-

'REVELRY'

ings, their meals in restaurants, and so on. Everything these people had on was turned round, admired, examined, and the price guessed. They touched on politics, but only in so far as they regarded them personally: different ways and means of escaping confiscation of property, and the clutches of the Cheka. They mentioned the theatre, but always with the idea of boasting of the prices they had given for their tickets.

There must have been at least forty people at this party. Just as I had intended to go away, I was surprised to see several well-known actors and musicians come into the room; one or two of them were friends of mine.

'You here?' said I to one of them.

'Times are hard and we are well paid for coming here,' was the answer. I stayed on and played billiards with some of the new-comers; the others played and recited for the company's entertainment.

At last supper was announced, the table was laid with silver and fine linen that bore the crests and initials of their former owners, the menus were painted in gold letters. There was wine in profusion, the food was of the most expensive, the guests pretended to be in high spirits and to enjoy themselves thoroughly; they became noisy and loud. When supper was over the host said there was a surprise in store for us and took us back into the drawing-room, where a screen was put up and a perfectly disgusting and obscene film was shown.

*

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

But I enjoyed other and pleasanter entertainments at that time, though rarely, it is true; when one or other of my friends had had a piece of luck, had sold some of their belongings for a fair price and had decided to give their friends a treat. There were great preparations beforehand, like school-boys and girls preparing for a party. First there was the question of whom to ask and then how to get together the necessary quantity of plates, knives and forks; as most of these had generally been sold, they had to be borrowed from friends. I remember one very successful supper. I came in rather early, the supper table was laid, there were many things missing, but it all looked comfortable and homelike. There was wine and vodka. The guests began to drop in, we all knew each other very well; one of us played the guitar and sang gipsy songs. The evening passed pleasantly, the enjoyment was real, there was no make-belief about it; the food was simple and good. We had singing, a little dancing, we seemed to have forgotten the grim Bolshevik reality and thought ourselves back in the good old times!

*

One more recollection I have of a delightful evening spent with the gipsy chorus, at a restaurant. This was in company with an old friend, whom I had almost lost sight of and had met accidentally one afternoon. She had come out to have a breath of fresh air. We decided to go into a restaurant and found the gipsies there. There was not much demand for their music now, and they complained

'REVELRY'

bitterly of the hard times. I had some money with me that day, and was able to pay for supper for the whole company; the gipsies drank a good deal and surpassed themselves in their songs. I never heard them sing as well as they did that evening. I knew many of them, we were a friendly company, understood each other and again imagined we were back in the good old times. The Bolsheviks, Cheka, hardships, everything were forgotten, we only knew and understood the gipsies and their music. We stayed in that restaurant till 10 o'clock next morning.

ARRESTED FOR THE SIXTH TIME

I WAS again on the look-out for 'work.' This time I was offered some 'hidden treasure,' the owner telling me that at the outset of the Revolution he had buried two iron boxes in the garden of a house in which he was then living. There were 70,000 Swedish crowns in one of the boxes; the other contained some documents and 1,000 crowns. After the 'October Revolution' the house had been seized by the Bolsheviks and he had not been able to dig up his property. He now offered me half the money, should I be able to get both the boxes for him. I consented willingly. Besides the hope of gaining something I liked the idea of searching for the buried fortune. I went to inspect the garden: it was 225 feet long and 150 feet in width, and was surrounded by brick walls; the paths were overgrown with grass. The old wooden house stood at the far end, away from the street. The owner showed me the tree under which the 70,000 crowns were buried and some bushes near which he had placed the other chest. I tried to rent the garden from the Bolsheviks, saying I wished to grow vegetables, but they would not let me. I then got to know one of the lodgers and entertained him several times in a neighbouring beer-house. I was not able to extract much information from him, but at least ascertained that no one knew about my 'buried treasure' and that it was in all probability safe still. I next watched the house at night and

ARRESTED FOR THE SIXTH TIME

watched the inmates to find out what hours they kept. One dark and rainy night, carrying a small spade, I climbed the garden wall. I did not like climbing over walls into other people's gardens at night. I heard some steps approaching, but they turned out to be outside in the street; then I saw a light in one of the windows; I hid under a tree, the light soon went out and I set to work. Having measured the distance from the tree to where the first box should be I began to dig. The earth was hard and seemed never to have been disturbed. I searched the ground; there was nothing to be found; I then went to the bushes to try and find the second chest, but with no better luck. Feeling utterly discouraged I filled up the holes, covered the loose earth with dry leaves and climbed back over the wall.

I began over again next evening, and went on digging deeper in the same places, but with no more success than the first time. At last I got a grave-digger's instrument. I was growing desperate and thought of giving the scheme up; I could not go there every night and had to choose dark moonless rainy nights for my attempts. Autumn was far advanced, I had decided to go once more and then give it all up. Beginning some distance away from the place I had been shown, I suddenly felt my spade touch something hard; the ground was not so hard as elsewhere, and the spade cut into it quite easily. When the hole was deep and wide enough I groped about and found an iron chest; I cleared the remaining earth away with my hand and pulled the

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

chest out with my teeth. It was big and heavy. I hastily filled up the hole, covered the place with leaves, wrapped my coat round the box, was just able to clamber over the wall with it and ran home; in spite of the heavy weight I was delighted, but on getting home, could find no way of opening it. Feeling secure, however, now that the precious object was in my possession I lay down and went to sleep. Next morning I opened it and at first found nothing but papers and documents inside, but after a moment or two discovered the 1,000 crown note at the bottom of the box; it was half rotten, but I succeeded in changing it. I had been successful so far, and although I gained nothing by this first find I now knew that the business was no bluff. But fate seemed to be against me this time, there had been a fall of snow, the ground was frozen; it was too late and my treasure was lost to me.

That same evening while I was undressing to go to bed there was a knock at my door; a loud persistent knocking. I opened the door and found there were ten armed men with an order for my arrest. They told me to dress and at once searched my room, took possession of all my papers and two of them led me away. The others went off in another direction, probably in search of more victims.

I did not know where I was being taken, or why I had been arrested. It could only be one of two things: either I was accused of anti-Soviet propaganda, of which I could easily prove myself innocent, or else one of my recent escapades had been dis-

ARRESTED FOR THE SIXTH TIME

covered; if the latter were the case, my end was certainly here. I would have laughed incredulously an hour ago if told that I would be arrested that night. I had eluded detection when there was every reason for my being arrested, and now, when so much time had elapsed, I would have thought arrest utterly improbable. But I still felt very uneasy.

I was brought to the prison on the Chpalernaia. The first hours after losing one's liberty are especially disagreeable; one longs to be back home, to be free. I was tired and sleepy and kept thinking of my room and my comfortable bed. I had to endure the renewal of my old prison experiences.

The room into which I was taken was already crowded with people who had evidently been dragged out of bed, and new ones were being brought in. Most of them were members of the N.E.P.¹; I could not think what I had in common with them or why I had been arrested. The room gradually filled, we were taken to different cells, and allowed to lie down. It was no good moaning and groaning as I heard so many of the others doing. I was furious at having been caught in a trap again and decided that as soon as I regained my freedom I would try and find a real 'fortune' and escape abroad. The only thing to be done at present was to go to sleep as soon as possible; the stronger my nerves were, the easier it would be to escape. I lay down and was soon fast asleep. Next morning we

¹ The N.E.P. was an organization, founded by Lenin, to raise capital for saving the Soviet State from bankruptcy.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

found out from the papers that many members of the N.E.P. had been arrested, among them speculators from the exchange, men caught selling alcohol or cocaine, card-players, members of clubs and all the 'socially dangerous' element of Soviet Russia.

Why I had been added to this company I could not make out, but on closer observation I saw that those in prison with me did not all belong to the categories enumerated in the newspapers; there were several officers of the guards, and many well-known and estimable people who never had anything to do with anything shady. I soon found out that many of those who did belong to the aforesaid 'professions' had been arrested for no serious reason, but because some Chekist or other had a personal grudge against them, or some of them had been purposely drawn into doing something illegal and had then been arrested. It was all a plan to arrest a whole mass of individuals who were undesirable from the Soviet point of view.

I remembered an incident that had occurred shortly before my arrest to which I had not attached much importance at the time. A friend of mine was singing at a concert and a large party of us had agreed to go and listen to her. Our places were in different parts of the hall; I was sitting with two ladies and another man, in the fifth row. When our friend came out on to the platform, one of the ladies sitting next to me wanted to see her; she was prevented from doing so by a well-dressed man who was sitting just in front of her and kept his hat on all the

ARRESTED FOR THE SIXTH TIME

time. She tried to look round him, and at last said very politely:

'Would you be so kind as to take your hat off?'

He did not move. She, thinking he had not heard, repeated her request, but with no result. Then the other lady turned to him and said very loudly and distinctly:

'This lady asks you to remove your hat.' This time he must have heard, but did not move a muscle. I could stand it no longer and said very loudly: 'I have seen many cads, but never one like this!' At this he turned his face, on which was plainly written, 'I am from the Gorokhovaia,' full on me and said: 'I will have a word with you later on!' The concert was spoilt for us; during the *entr'acte* the ladies insisted on us all going away. I wanted to know what his intentions were and we waited at the entrance; we saw him go out by a side-door and return with two policemen. We immediately left, and, to be on the safe side, went home by a roundabout way. A few days later a friend of mine, who had been at this unlucky concert, was stopped in the street by an individual closely resembling my 'cad' and asked whether he had been at the concert with Bezsonoff; my friend seeing no reason for denying the fact said: 'Yes.'

When we had been ten days at the Chpalernaia, interrogations commenced; they went on all day and all night. I was sent for at 5 a.m. and questioned by a mere boy in military uniform. We sat staring at each other for several minutes. I must have smiled

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

involuntarily for he left off trying to put me out of countenance and began asking questions. I had not the least idea of what he was going to accuse me, and what he knew about me, and instead of following my usual plan of stating everything truthfully, I invented a whole history about myself, saying I had been to the university, had joined the army as a volunteer, and telling him the regiment I had been in and the battles I had taken part in. I went on lying glibly, but somehow felt I was not believed. He wrote down all I had said and then began making rude remarks.

‘What were you after being a Major-General?’

‘Orderly,’ I replied.

‘What is an orderly,’ he said; ‘is it a kind of funkey?’

‘If you do not behave yourself I shall leave off altogether,’ I said.

‘Well, haven’t you done yet?’

‘Perhaps,’ I answered.

He took out a slip of paper from the heap before him and read the contents out loud; I listened to the exact truth about my former career.

‘Will that do?’ he asked.

‘You must add,

“Joined the White Army.”

‘That will do now.’

‘Will you answer my questions correctly now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, sign this first,’ and he handed me the list on which he had noted all my false depositions.

ARRESTED FOR THE SIXTH TIME

'No, thank you,' said I, pushing the sheet back to him.

'Well, state that you have given me wrong information.'

'No, thank you.'

'What am I to do with this then?'

'This is what you had better do!' said I, pretending to tear the paper across.

'Oh, we never do such things.'

'And I never sign anything that is sure to speak against me.'

We went on bargaining; I did not sign my false depositions and gave correct ones, which I myself wrote down and signed. Fortunately no mention was made of my late 'occupations.'

CHAPTER XVI

SIBERIA

WE were not kept waiting long. Photographs were taken of each of us, and our sentence was pronounced; 200 were exiled to Siberia, I, among the number, being accused of not having had my name entered on the list of former officers, of having been previously imprisoned for counter-revolutionary activities, and of having been in the White Army. I was exiled for a term of three years. I was furious at this, as I was really only guilty of not having entered my name as a former officer and ought to have been sentenced for that only. Our exile was a very cruel punishment; most of my companions were torn away from their families. They were not allowed to see them and were exiled without any time to settle their 'affairs.' I tried to incite them all to a hunger strike, but the prison authorities prevented it by telling us that we were to leave next day. I had decided to run away, but had not made up my mind whether it would be best to escape on the way from prison, at the station, or on arriving at our destination.

We were led out into the prison yard, counted, surrounded by an escort and taken to the railway station. As soon as we got out of the prison yard we were met by a crowd of women and children, — they were mothers, wives and children of the exiles, who had somehow got to know our fate and had been waiting for hours at the prison gate. They all ran to

SIBERIA

meet us, crying, yelling, and cursing the 'Ogpu.' The soldiers drove them away with the butt-end of their rifles.

I purposely stayed behind in the last row and, when we started, pretended to be lame and not to be able to keep up with the rest. I must have had to deal with an experienced soldier; he kept his eye on me all the time and, having twice told me to keep up with the rest, at last prodded me with his bayonet; the wound was not serious, but it was clear that it was no use attempting to escape for the moment.

The families followed us in a crowd to the station, where the police stopped them and prevented them from going any further. I again thought of making an attempt to escape from the platform, while we were getting into the train, as there was no one looking at me. There was just time to slip under the van, but I hesitated, not so much because of the fear of being shot, but because I did not know where to hide in Petrograd if I did get away. It was too late, a soldier had come up and I was soon in the train with the others.

Our journey lasted several days, we passed Viatka, then Perm, and reached Ekaterinburg; the first stage on our way to Siberia. We were taken to the town prison and there met a whole party of prisoners like ourselves, from Moscow. We were all to be grouped and sent to different places in Siberia. Life in Ekaterinburg was not hard for us, we all had some money, there was a canteen in the prison and we could get most of the things we wanted, especially

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

as we were on the footing of exiles, not convicts. There were plenty of other captives in that prison; we were sometimes locked in at night and heard men being led along the passage outside our door to execution.

We were at last divided into groups and our destinations fixed. I was in a group of 100 exiles that was to be sent to Tobolsk or to somewhere in its province. Now Tobolsk was only 250 miles from the railway, whereas Obdorsk was about 750 miles and Berezov over 1,000 miles away from the railway. It was all-important to us not to be sent to one of those out-of-the-way places; we all preferred Tobolsk. Our next stage was Tiumen. The prison was full, and our escort at last succeeded in having us admitted, on the night of our arrival, to the prison theatre, where we all lay down to sleep pell-mell on the floor. Next morning we began to discuss means of remaining in Tiumen as long as possible. We thought it could be arranged, though some said it would be better to go at once to Tobolsk; then there would be no risk of being sent to Obdorsk or Berezov. Others, myself among them, thought there was a chance of our being kept in Tiumen or its neighbourhood. It was still impossible, owing to the ice, to go by water, and it would cost too much to send us all to Tobolsk by road, in sledges. They could not keep us long in prison here, as they had not enough food, or means of getting any. We existed on what the townspeople paid the authorities for work done by prisoners. Our stay there was a great

SIBERIA

burden on the Tiumen prison and we knew the authorities would be only too glad to get rid of us. If we had kept quiet all would have been well, but we were a disorderly rabble and too fond of chattering.

I had been chosen as representative and spokesman to confer with the prison authorities and the 'Ogpu.' The governor of the prison came to speak to us and no sooner had he appeared than several prisoners began talking to him and so spoilt the whole business by asking if they might be allowed to go to Tobolsk at their own expense. The governor of course promised to do all he could to help them, and told them to choose two representatives to go and hire horses in the town.

I saw that was the end to our plan. I said at once that I would not be able to go as I had no money. The governor did not seem to like my remark and went out saying that we were to prepare a list of those wishing to go to Tobolsk at their own expense. When he had gone we all started quarrelling and made a considerable noise. At last it turned out that thirty out of the hundred could not afford to go, having no money. I was particularly anxious to remain in Tiumen; it was on the railway and escape would be comparatively easy. I decided not to move whatever happened.

The list was prepared and sent up. The result was a visit from the 'Ogpu.' At first they did their best to persuade those who wanted to stay behind to join their companions in going to Tobolsk; when this met with no good result they resorted to threats.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

'He has gold teeth in his mouth and can't afford to travel at his own expense,' said the governor, looking at me. 'I will make you all regret it; if you stay here I shall do my best to starve you to death!' This threat had the desired effect; there were only two of us who persisted in our refusal to go.

Next morning the governor came in and told those who were leaving to get ready.

'Well, are you going?' said he to me.

'No.'

'Shut him up by himself in cell N. 2, and let him have nothing but the rations,' he shouted. I said good-bye to those who were leaving, took up my belongings and was led away by a warder to be shut up in a cell. A stinking pail was put in with me to make me realize the enormity of my offence. My companions looked at me pityingly.

Cell N. 2 was high up on the top story. I drew the table up to the little window, placed a stool on it and, standing on this stool, could just see out of the window and into the prison yard. The climate is splendid in that part of Siberia. The sun shines most of the time, the air is clear and wonderfully pure, the temperature is low but even, there is seldom any wind. Spring was fast approaching, the snow had begun to thaw in the sun, the roofs were dripping. I opened the tiny window and longed for freedom and fresh air. The yard was full of sledges, harnessed to troikas. I think it is only in Siberia, where a distance of 200 or 300 miles is considered short, that that old type of troika is still to be met

SIBERIA

with; the strong little Siberian horse, its long tail tied tightly up like a door-knocker, and wearing a bell under the douga. The sledge is full of hay to make a soft bed, the driver sitting sideways on his narrow little box, or rather board, his old 'armia' (coat) tied with a coloured sash round his waist, his whip sticking out of the sash, his tall old-fashioned hat jammed down over his ears. In former times, when there were not many railways in Russia, these troikas used to be seen all over the country. When, as a small school-boy, I used to go to spend my holidays with my grandmother in the country, this was the usual mode of conveyance. This recollection made me still sadder and the longing for freedom grew.

I saw the exiles brought out and distributed among the sledges, the escort getting into the remaining ones. The governor made a sign and they started on their long drive, some of them reverently crossing themselves. They drove out at the prison gate. I was left alone. . . .

C H A P T E R X V I I
M Y S E C O N D E S C A P E

THE Tiumen prison was a typical specimen of the old-fashioned prisons of long ago. On seeing it I was at once put in mind of many a description of old prison buildings. The old 'Vladimirka' road, the clanking of chains, clean-shaven heads, old convict songs. These old prisons are full of legends. Here a repaired wall tells of the escape of a party of convicts forty years ago. Over there a group of prisoners, out for their daily walk, took advantage of a newly raised watch-tower, stepped into the old one which was much lower, killed the sentry on duty and escaped over the wall.

In the Ekaterinburg prison I had already heard some of the old convict songs and stories. Regular criminals are not like the educated captives of the Bolshevik prisons. They seldom complain of their treatment, they consider it bad form to do so, but they want an outlet to express their grievances and find it in their songs. In them they pour out all the bitterness of their souls. That is why these old convict songs are so full of intense yearning; whenever I heard them I felt a lump in my throat. The old prisons formed a very suitable background for these songs.

Until then I had not had the opportunity of meeting any Siberian convicts of the old type, but here I made friends with one. He was a peasant, by no means old, who had specialized in house-

MY SECOND ESCAPE

breaking, 'when the prize had been worth taking,' and who had many burglaries on his conscience. I sized him up, and then told him straight out that I intended to escape, and it was thanks to him that I succeeded in doing so.

Day after day passed in my cell. I made no complaints and asked for nothing. 'I am badly off, but I may be able to win,' I thought, and finally I did win.

A fortnight later I was ordered to appear before the 'Ogpu' and received a ticket of leave, which gave me the right to live in Tiumen, in comparative liberty, till the opening up of the navigation. Now it was for me to act in the right way and so be able to escape in the end.

I had to present myself once a week at the 'Ogpu' and at the police headquarters. My address was written down and I and my landlord was obliged to report if I moved. Living in a small town like Tiumen, I was known by sight to all the inhabitants and it is not necessary to say that I was kept under observation, as was everyone else. Of course the 'Ogpu' always had someone on duty at the railway station to watch the arrivals and departures. All these circumstances had to be taken into consideration in planning my escape.

This would have been comparatively easy if I had known anyone on whom I might rely for help; I knew no one in the little town and it would be folly to trust a stranger, in Soviet Russia; the danger of betrayal was too great. My convict friend had given

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

me the address of an old comrade of his who lived in the town. On obtaining my freedom I at once went to see him and it was he who finally helped me to escape. The following incident shows to what an extent every little thing is at once known in Tiumen: I went once or twice to the station to study the railway map. When next I went to see my new friend he told me that he knew all about my expeditions and strongly advised me to discontinue them.

I had sufficient money. I had grown a beard. The things to see about now were a change of clothes, an explanation of my absence from my room and a false passport; then a railway ticket must be bought and means found for me to receive it at the next station, I would have to hire a horse and a cart to take me there in time for the Petrograd train.

The most important and difficult part of it all was to find a false passport; they could be procured at the market, but I found nothing suitable there. In this case fortune favoured me. I was sitting one day in a beer-house. A half-educated individual came up to me and started talking. I soon found out that he came from the neighbouring town of Kurgan and that he favoured Communism. I was on the point of going, when the conversation quite accidentally turned on documents and passports and my companion showed me his.

'It is perfectly useless to me; in my own town everyone knows me,' he added.

'It would be most useful to me,' I thought, and a definite plan began to mature in my head.

MY SECOND ESCAPE

I at once invited him to have some more beer, after which we had some vodka; then some more beer. My new acquaintance was as drunk as could be; it was getting late; I took him under the arm and led him to my lodgings, where I put him to bed. He talked for a while in a tipsy way and then fell sound asleep. I quickly lit a candle, drew the pocket-book from his pocket, and went out into the dark passage. It took me some time to find the passport, but I discovered it at last, slipped it into my own pocket, went back into the room, returned the pocket-book to its owner's pocket, lay down and went to sleep with a perfectly clear conscience. Thus, I became a pickpocket.

The time had now come to hasten my departure. The day for presenting myself before the 'Ogpu' was Saturday. The train for Petrograd left on Sunday. I bought some new clothes and told my landlord that I had taken another room, but was not quite sure it would suit me, so he might expect me back. I paid him a few days extra rent, and left most of my belongings with him. B - ff hired a cart and horse for me, bought my ticket at Tiumen station and gave it to a friend of his, who was to meet me at the next station on the Petrograd line.

On Saturday I appeared as usual before the 'Ogpu,' and early on Sunday morning, before anyone was up, I walked out to the outskirts of the town, got into the cart, which was waiting for me there, and bade farewell to Tiumen, as I hoped, for ever.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

It was early spring; the wheels stuck in the dirty snow and half-frozen mud. We had forty versts to drive. At first all went well. The horse was strong and ran along briskly enough. But unluckily it began to rain, the mud got thicker and softer because of the melting snow. The driver began to use his whip; he knew that my life depended on my getting to the station in time for the train. I kept on looking at my watch. I saw we were going to be late. The driver's whip whistled, but with no effect. The little horse had no strength left. We drove on in silence. Our minds were fixed on getting to our destination in time. If we were late it might mean disaster!

At last the station came in sight. I had my watch in my hand. We were late. We moved on nevertheless. At last we were there; I jumped out and asked after the train — it was two hours late! I was in luck! When the train came in my ticket was silently handed over to me, as had been arranged. I found a seat in the car, then went at once to the lavatory and there destroyed all my old papers and passports, got into an upper berth, lay down and started repeating to myself: 'I am a native of the government of Tiumen, Iarensky district, Nikolay Petrovitch Verchinin.'

The first step had been successful, but I was far from considering myself safe. There were many difficulties before me. First of all there was the journey to Petrograd, then the problem of living there. Also I had to procure enough money to

MY SECOND ESCAPE

enable me to escape across the frontier, as that was, after all, my final object.

Before leaving Tiumen I had done all I could in order that my absence might not be noticed for four days, otherwise an order might be sent for my arrest on the way to Petrograd. I was not sure, however, that all my precautions would be successful. Near Viatka, I think, a 'commission of control' passed through the train calling out (most unpleasantly for me): 'Show your documents!' I held out mine and they passed on. This reassured me; it meant that nothing was yet known of my escape.

I was obliged to get out of the train, to get something to eat. As I knew so few people in Tiumen I was not particularly afraid of meeting my fellow-passengers. However, I was more on my guard later: for, at one station, I suddenly came face to face with an official from Tiumen who knew me. On catching sight of him, I at once put my hand up to my face and rubbed my eyes, turned round, stepped into the car and went back to my upper berth. This circumstance only reminded me of what I knew before, that, in the new life opening before me, I could not be sure of safety for five minutes together.

The journey lasted four days and four nights. At last we were approaching Petrograd. The country was well known to me. It might have been more prudent to get out at one of the small stations before reaching Petrograd. But I was sure that the

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

success of such adventures as mine did not depend on details, and I decided to continue my journey to the end.

I arrived at Petrograd, stepped out of the train and walked past the 'control.' They did not stop me. I then breathed freely, left my luggage at the station and came out on to the Nicholas Place. Where was I to go and what was I to do? . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

AMONG THIEVES AND PROSTITUTES

I KNEW that, in spite of having lived all my life in Petrograd, and of being known by sight to many, there was not much risk of being caught if I kept quiet, although the 'Ogpu' had my photographs. I had disguised myself as well as I could and wore different clothes. The 'Ogpu' seldom have people followed in the streets, their strong point is watching houses and their inhabitants, all the comings and goings are reported to them by their agents; all the occupations and means of subsistence of the occupants of every house are known to them, through these agents.

At first some friends offered me hospitality; they were not afraid of the risk of keeping me, an escaped prisoner of the 'Ogpu'! Later on I moved to other friends, who were equally kind; I lay in hiding without leaving the house for days at a stretch. My disguise must have been successful, as several people, who knew me very well indeed, failed to recognize me.

I was at last obliged to show myself, as my false passport had to be legalized. I also wanted to find the 'hidden treasure,' and having dug it up, prepare to escape. It was my firm intention to cross the frontier as soon as possible. If it had not been for my hope of finding a fortune I should never have come to Petrograd; but I wanted a large sum of money for my escape.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

First of all I took advantage of my acquaintance with criminals and sought their help. If I knew the Parisian criminal underworld I should be able to compare it and its slang with that of Petrograd; I think that that of Soviet Russia would be found to contain more 'picturesque' inhabitants and to have a more interesting 'argot.'

It is not easy to be admitted into their midst, they are very exclusive and seldom admit anyone to their inner circle; but my former acquaintance with criminals while in prison, and my knowledge of their language, enabled me to make friends with others in Petrograd and to gain access to their society.

All criminal Petrograd was divided up into districts, of which the one I inhabited was considered the most 'aristocratic.' I soon met a prominent member of the underworld, by chance.

There was a magazine which dealt with criminology, and I had read an article in it, written by a doctor. It was about testing the mental condition of criminals, and the following case was related: 'A healthy-looking, stalwart youth was sometimes seized with fits of epilepsy, during which he kept knocking his head against the stone floor and calling out: "Blood, blood is flowing! Hurrah! Belaia Tserkov is taken!"' The doctor went on to say that he could not understand a man in his right mind banging his head like that on the stone floor and not seeming to mind unexpected pricks with a pin, and that he could not discover if the man was simulating madness or whether he was really out of his mind.

AMONG THIEVES AND PROSTITUTES

My clothes were quite appropriate, and my Vologda friends had told me where their Petrograd accomplices were to be found. So I went one evening into a certain beer-house. On entering I at once saw that I had come to the right place. I heard the well-known ‘music’ and went up to one of the company. He looked at me suspiciously at first; but when I mentioned all the names and nicknames of those with whom I had been in prison he became more affable. I told him that I wanted a false passport and a safe hiding-place. I seemed to inspire confidence and flattered him by saying that a detective would never have ventured to meet him alone. We grew quite sociable over some beer, to which I treated him. After some vodka he became confidential and told me that he was not afraid of being arrested, as he had a paper proving that he was mad. ‘What does your madness consist in?’ said I.

‘Oh, as soon as I am taken into custody, I begin banging my head against the floor and screaming: “Blood, blood is flowing! Hurrah! Belaia Tserkov is taken!”’ Upon hearing this I told him about the article I had read; he was delighted to have deceived a doctor.

He told me his name: ‘Sachka,’ and even, after a moment’s hesitation, his nickname as well. We were great friends after this. I was fairly launched in the society that it is difficult to do without, in Soviet Russia. Half an hour had not elapsed before ‘Vanka, the Jumper’ and ‘Petka, the Nightingale’ had joined us, promised me any passport I liked,

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

for the next day, and assured me that all their hiding-places were at my disposal. I heard from them about my old friends and fellow-captives 'Vasska, the Cow,' who had been shot for robbery, and 'Fedka Glot,' who was again in prison. When I came next morning to the appointed meeting-place a passport was handed to me and two hiding-places indicated. They were of the greatest use to me in the weeks that followed.

I had certainly fallen very low, but I had to live. However, there was something to be said even for these people; their human side was apparent. Their mutual loyalty and their craving for some kind of love and affection were their strong points. Each one of these criminals had a woman belonging to him. Most of these women were common prostitutes, but such love and fidelity as they showed, I have rarely seen equalled. Real faithful love that lasted till death and bore all. The kind of love that is all-in-all to a woman, the only meaning of existence to her. I heard about one of these women, who accompanied her lover in all his campaigns with the Red Army; she walked by his side holding on to his stirrup. I must add that I had many opportunities to witness a woman's love, but cannot say the same for the men; I think that if anyone dared take his woman away from him, the man would have turned into a wild beast.

Many of these girls were not unattractive; I remember one of them; eighteen-year-old Vera; she was not a prostitute, she lived with her lover, and

AMONG THIEVES AND PROSTITUTES

drank with him too; she had a pretty little face and owing to this and also to her kind heart and readiness to do anything, whether it meant a feast, a drink, lending money, or saving a man, she was always up to the occasion and was the idol of the whole district.

I often spent the night in these robbers' dens, and have reason to be grateful to them for having offered me shelter, admitted me into their midst and otherwise helped me.

CHAPTER XIX
BURIED TREASURE

I WAS determined to find a 'fortune' and had become quite a specialist in digging and searching underground. I could now say at once, when working with my grave-digger's instrument, whether the earth had been dug up or not, and could even say approximately, how recently it had been touched. My life was now complicated by the possibility of being captured at any moment, as I was now a 'wanted' man. I had no room of my own and spent most of the nights out in the streets, sleeping in one of the thieves' hiding-places in the daytime. But these difficulties only served to strengthen my determination; the more difficulties I met with, the more obstinate I grew. It was a considerable sum that I hoped to find, and every risk must be run, in order to get possession of it.

As soon as I could, I went to see the owner of the 'treasure' I had been looking for when I had been arrested; he corroborated his former indications. The first box, having been found, proved that the second one existed and could be found.

I first watched the house and, having ascertained that the inhabitants had not changed and still kept the same hours, I climbed over the wall one night and again started digging, but with no result. When I had almost lost all hope I suddenly heard my spade strike against some metal. I dug with vigour and unearthed a soldier's saucepan!

BURIED TREASURE

Time went on, my money was coming to an end, my hiding-places might be discovered at any moment; I was at my wits' end and sought the criminals' help. I had heard that one of their lucrative 'professions' was grave-robbing. Through the agents they had, in undertakers' offices, they found out when anyone was buried with something valuable, dug up the coffin and took out the costly articles. This was a very risky 'profession,' as the cemeteries were guarded at night and the punishment for the desecration of graves was more severe than for ordinary robbery. But it was very lucrative, as in former times people were often buried with jewellery and other objects of value. It was only dire necessity that made me turn to this worst kind of robber for advice and help.

My friend Sachka introduced me to an experienced 'grave-robber.' He had retired from his 'profession,' since the Revolution, as he considered there were no corpses worth robbing now; nothing precious was ever put underground in these hard times. He told me of old times when he had done magnificent 'work,' had even found diamonds on some of the corpses he had robbed. He was much respected by his companions.

Professional thieves are always honest with each other and never deceive one of their own gang when dividing stolen goods. But I could not be sure of enjoying the same privileges as, in spite of my good relations with many of the criminals, I was not looked upon as entirely one of them and did not want to be

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

so considered, or to be altogether in their power. I told my new acquaintance what I wanted to do, without telling him where I wished to do it, until he had a plan ready. His plan, when formed, surpassed my expectations.

We had decided to work together and search for my famous 'treasure.' My new accomplice procured an instrument invented during the War, for discovering buried shells by means of an electro-magnet. Armed with this instrument and having prepared a paper purporting to be a warrant giving us authority to search the house in question, we shut the inhabitants up in the house itself and searched the garden thoroughly. This time we found nothing and there must have been nothing to find. Why this was so, I cannot say. Either it had all been dug up before, unknown to the owner, or he had changed his mind and, not wishing to share his property with me, had indicated the wrong place. It had been worth while trying and, had I been offered another proposition like it, I should have done just exactly the same.

I had lost my game. It was six months since I had come back to Petrograd; I had wasted all that time. I had nothing left to live on and did not know what to do next.

CHAPTER XX
SEVENTH ARREST

I REMEMBER that last night; I walked along the streets with no object; I felt utterly hopeless and forlorn; I had neither money, nor food, no roof over my head, no family to mind what happened to me. . . . No hope, nothing whatever. But the thought came to me that I could trust to God's help. He had often saved me at the last moment, when I had been in the last extremity of despair. He would help me now. I would meet someone who would help me to get away, to go abroad; a new life would begin for me.

I hoped, but my reason told me there was no way out of my predicament. Towards morning I looked in on the 'professionals.' I sat down to rest after having walked all night. I was exhausted and my despair was worse than ever. What *was* I to do? Where was I to turn? What if I were to throw everything up and begin war on the Bolsheviks all by myself, with no aim in view, but revenge, murder?

I fell asleep; when I awoke the same thoughts came back and I formulated a plan of action; I cared for nothing; thousands were to perish, innocent victims. What was that to me; it was going to be my revenge!

It was 4 p.m. I went out. It was raining. I walked along, neither knowing nor caring where I went and suddenly felt I was being followed. I dropped some matches and stopped to pick them up and to ascertain whether it was only my fancy. I saw no one and went on.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

Having crossed the Nevsky I again felt there was someone behind me. I tried to persuade myself that it was all nervousness. There was a garden on my right, I decided to go in and wait; if no one followed me it would prove that it had all been my fancy. I kept repeating the words: 'For the last time,' over and over in my mind. I went into the garden. I heard whispers behind me, but did not look round; someone was running. 'Too late' . . . 'The last time, the last time,' the words went on in my head.

I saw a revolver before my eyes. I turned round and saw that I was caught. Several men in uniform were before me; their faces showed signs of the use or abuse of narcotics; their hands shook.

'Are you armed?' their hands were in my pockets.

'Is there anything that I must hide?' thought I. I had some money in a secret pocket.

My captors seized me and led me away. What was in store for me now? I felt that there must be some way out even now, but my reason would admit nothing but hopelessness and the end of everything. Had God forsaken me altogether?

They brought me to the Chpalernaia. I was searched; my watch was taken. My name was not asked and I was entered on the lists as 'Unknown N. 11.'

'Take him to the "special" floor!' ordered the man on duty.

I was taken up and searched once more; this time they undressed me, but did not find my money. 'Cell N. 132' . . .

CHAPTER XXI

SIX MONTHS OF SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

I WAS alone in the cell. The great heavy iron door closed upon me. Warders have a peculiar way of shutting and locking cell doors: they do it with as little movement as possible; the door is opened, the prisoner let in, the door shut and locked again; it is all done almost mechanically, and always the same sequence of well-known sounds are heard.

All these are details, but the prisoner feels this first sudden separation from the outer world very painfully at the outset; the first time the door of his cell is shut on him is a very significant and painful moment.

The cell measured seven feet in length, five in breadth. A folding bedstead was screwed to one wall, a table to another wall; a stool, a lamp, a tiny window high up in the wall and out of reach; lavatory arrangements in the corner; a shelf with a cup; soup-basin and spoon. That was all there was in the room. It was bare and uncomfortable-looking; if only I could have had some of my own things here; my pillow, blanket, mug, any of these things would make me feel more at home!

There was no way out of it now. There was no hope of any change. I was the 'Unknown prisoner N. 11' and there was no more to be said or hoped. No one knew of my arrest. I could not let out the secret of my hiding-places. There was an end of

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

everything. I would be starved to death. It was cold in the cell, my clothes were wet; I took my coat and boots off, lay down and began asking myself the question over and over again: 'Is there a way out of this hopeless condition?'

And then suddenly the word 'God' shot through my mind. 'Well, what of God?' was my next thought. 'He will help.' But I had prayed for His help with all my heart and soul. Had He helped me? Perhaps He had after all. 'Perhaps all depends on myself, on the way I look to Him.'

Nothing was clear to me; I longed to understand, to know, to be sure of something, to believe. I went on puzzling to myself. Death was before me. Either capital punishment or death from slow starvation or gradual decline. Death was certain. I again saw no way out. But here again came the words: 'God! Believe in Him; seek His help.'

My reason seemed to reply: 'It is silly to believe in God, it is illogical, you are in prison, in the hands of the "Ogpu"; your case is hopeless.' My reason seemed to have got the better of all other arguments. But at the same time another voice kept on saying: 'You do believe; you do; you do!' I looked up and said to myself: 'Yes, I do! there is no doubt of it. I will go to Him, I will seek His help. I will submit my will to His. He will help me. He is sure to. He will! He will.'

I went to Him. I prayed as I had never thought it possible to pray. There were no words to my prayer; I prayed with my whole soul. Peace came

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

after that. God had answered my prayer. From that moment my faith was sincere and firm. I knew that whatever might happen He was with me. I had happiness; not the poor little happiness I had always sought before, but true happiness that had nothing to do with place, or outward circumstances. I was happy in the belief that He was with me, in having understood the meaning of the Kingdom of Heaven, that I was His servant and He was my Lord, that I had given myself up to Him and He was henceforth my Master and Shepherd.

I felt at peace. God had helped me in my trouble. I had experienced His Love.

The key of my cell was turned and the heavy door opened. The warder came in saying: 'Get up and follow me!' My mind was again assailed by the former thoughts. What would be the result of the inquiry to which I was being taken? What else was in store for me? Would I be shot? 'But God . . . not now . . . I cannot think of God now, later on . . . now I must think of the answers to give.' But what had become of my recently acquired faith? It was all gone.

There was room for hope yet. My case would be investigated; I would be able to explain all; the judges were human beings after all. I would get a year perhaps, for having escaped, that would be all. I might even be acquitted; God would help me!

'Hurry up there!' called out the warder. I wanted to answer him back, but refrained.

The clock on the landing pointed to 1 a.m.,

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

when I followed the warder out of my cell. The prison seemed to be asleep; all the lights in the cells were out, the prisoners were lying on their beds, but how many of them were really asleep? Most of them were, in all probability, lying awake in mental anguish . . .

We went along a landing; then descended into one below, paved with asphalt, our steps resounding along the passage. Others were being led out too. We came to the prison office. What kind of man would question me? What would he ask me? What did he know about me? What should I tell him? I decided to tell all the truth up to my arrival in Petrograd and to say nothing about my stay there. I did not feel in the least inclined to exert my mind to reply and be on the alert; but the principal thing was to be calm and quiet.

At that moment I heard a woman's cry; a moan of intense pain. The sound came from a cell we were passing. But why a woman in a prison for men? I had no time to think of that; I had to fix my mind on the answers I was to give.

I went in and saw the representative of the 'Ogpu.' He was standing behind a table, the room was brilliantly lit. I looked him all over. He had large, open, rather pleasant eyes; he evidently used some narcotic. He might have been an actor in former days. I did not like his hands. I often judge a man by his hands. This one, according to his hands, might be capable of anything. But I might be mistaken; hands are not everything.

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

On the whole he might have been much worse. He began at once: 'Please sit down; you were arrested and are still kept under the name of N. I. I. Will you tell me your name? You need not if you do not wish.'

In my turn I asked him a question: 'Of what am I accused?'

'Of being a spy in the service of the Entente,' said he.

'My name is Bezsonoff,' I answered.

If I had refused to tell him my real name he could, backed by a few more statements, have got up an accusation of espionage against me. He would have sent it to Moscow, where the sentence could be confirmed. I would be shot and his future career assured, for having discovered a dangerous spy. As it was, he had lost this time.

He went on questioning me. At last I asked him if he knew anything about me. He answered truthfully that he knew nothing. I told him all about myself up till my return to Petrograd, drawing his attention to the injustice of my exile to Siberia, and adding that I would answer any questions that related to my life up till my escape from Tiumen, but could tell him nothing about my subsequent life in Petrograd. He listened very attentively, asked several more questions, and then said my exile had indeed been quite unjustified. We smoked; he seemed quite natural and sincere in all he said; it must have lasted about an hour.

'Well, Iuri Dmitrievich,' said he at last, 'so you

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

refuse to tell me where you were staying at the moment of your arrest?’

‘I cannot tell you that.’

‘Well, I will write it all down.’ He did so and I signed my statements. It was all done very politely, and very cleverly too. We shook hands at parting, in a friendly way. An inquiry like this is a kind of game. Of course the chances are not equal. The one who questions tries to take all and give nothing in return; the other must take as much as he can and give as little as possible! There was something strange about this man (Lange, he told me his name was); he seemed to have obtained nothing from me and not even to have tried to get anything. I did not understand him. Was it a new departure of the ‘Ogpu’? Had they really a human being among them? Was there any good in him, or was he only a little better than his fellows? Was he, perhaps, a devil personified; something worse than all the rest of them put together?

I was back in my cell soon after 2 a.m., utterly exhausted, and fell asleep the moment I lay down.

*

Next morning I was awakened by the opening of the slit in my door. A hand pushed a slice of bread towards me and a voice said: ‘Hot water!’

I brought my mug, it was filled, and the window was shut again. I was cold and the hot water warmed me a little. I remembered yesterday’s interrogation; my heart was heavy; I felt hopeless and depressed. I wanted to wash, but there was no towel.

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

I could not even change my shirt; later on, I washed my handkerchief and then washed myself. After that I looked out of the window; I could just manage to see out by climbing on to the lavatory appliances. I knew the yard already; some prisoners were out for their airing. In future looking out of the window would be my only recreation.

I heard steps coming down the passage, and got down. A warder peered through the loop-hole. I began to inspect the cell, the walls were covered with inscriptions.

There was a great Crucifix on the door. The eye was surrounded by a halo and the words: 'The all-seeing Eye,' were written over it. Near the bed and over the table, was the cipher for communicating with the inmates of the neighbouring cells, by knocking on the wall. All sorts of inscriptions there were. Most of them short and terrible in their significance; dates, names, initials, cases: espionage, robbery, 'counter-revolution'; Death seemed to hover over them all.

Some recorded the approaching death of their writer thus: 'So-and-so, sentenced to death, was imprisoned in this cell.' Should I feel any inclination to write on the wall if I were condemned to death? perhaps so. Anything to distract one's thoughts if they were not fixed in the only right direction; if they were not turned to God.

I did not believe these last inscriptions very much; as far as I know the 'Ogpu' never pronounces its sentence beforehand. The victim is led down into

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

the cellar and shot on the way down. But means vary. There is no knowing.

Besides these writings there were others less prominent, but more reliable. Most of them were records of dates only. One near the bed had been carried on for four months; another one over the wall for eight, with a mention of the accusation and a note in another hand: 'will probably be shot to-night.' But the most impressive was the one in the corner which had been continued for eleven months; it had been begun with some sharp instrument, then an ink-pencil had been used and the last entries had been made with a lead pencil. The last entry of all was: 'Am to be taken to hospital to-day.' This spoke for itself; the prison hospital was in reality a mortuary; prisoners were taken there to die, so that there need be no fuss about their bodies in the prison.

Some of the inscriptions were full of venom. Others were of a religious character: 'Only those who have been in prison know how to pray. He who endures to the end will be saved;' 'Pray to St. John, the Warrior.'

I knew that useful implements, such as knives, pencils and bits of string are always to be found in a cell and began to search for them. How all these things get into the cells I cannot say, but they are to be found in every one, and each prisoner adds to the collection. During my stay in cell N. 132 I contributed three pencils, one of which was given me by a warder. The authorities know where to look

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

for these hoards, but seldom touch them. I found a piece of lead and a bit of glass to serve as a knife and began my diary.

Every now and then I climbed up to look out of the window and saw two former officers I knew among the prisoners out for their daily walk. We were not allowed to look out of the window; that must have been one of the reasons why I felt inclined to do so; it was, besides, my only amusement. The warder's steps were heard approaching and there was always time to get down, but once I was caught; the man whom I afterwards called 'the rat' was on duty that day; he wore soft felt slippers and his steps were never heard beforehand; he now came softly up to my door, looked through the loop-hole and saw me at the window. He opened the door and said in an insinuating gentle voice with a complacent smile:

'If I ever see you at the window again I shall report you!'

This man did all he could to make the prisoner's life a little harder than was necessary; whenever he could, he did something to make our situation harder.

Of some of the other warders I can, on the contrary, say nothing but good; they used to give me a bit of bread or some extra soup when they could. One of them even brought me a Bible. As in many other cases, I am not able to say exactly how it came into my possession. But I had it, in spite of the rule against Bibles in all Soviet prisons,

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

I took it away with me when I finally escaped from the country. I wrote my diary in it during my flight and it is now among my most precious possessions.

*

Sounds were heard in the passage, my spy-hole was opened and the 'rat's' voice said:

'Dinner!'

I handed out my soup-basin and the 'rat' poured some liquid into it. I peeped out to see if any of the prisoners were helping to carry dinner round, but there were none to be seen. Even this means of communicating with one's fellow-creatures was denied us. My basin held about a plate and a half of hot water, with a few cabbage leaves in it, and tiny dots of fat. That was all my dinner.

The day seemed very long. I was very cold; the window was cracked. I began walking up and down my cell. This is the usual occupation of solitary prisoners; the asphalt floor showed deep impressions in the corners. When it grew dark the electric lamp was lit and a voice said: 'Supper!'

I again passed my basin up to the spy-hole and it was filled with watery gruel. The day was at an end. What more did I want? I seemed to have reached the lowest depths of misery, and saw no hope whatever before me.

I did not mind my solitude so much just then; I wanted to be alone and at peace, but I knew that at the end of a few weeks this solitude would be terrible, I would crave for intercourse with some

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

human being. Now the only means of communicating with my neighbours was by knocking on the walls; but this could not be called real intercourse and was, besides, strictly forbidden.

Those who, like myself, were shut up in the 'special' story were never allowed out, even in the prison yard. I had no blanket, the pillow was filthy, so was the mattress, and both were full of lice! I would certainly be covered with them too, very soon; my shirt was blue and they would be difficult to find on that. I had no soap and only one pocket-handkerchief.

Hot water and a slice of bread in the morning, 'dinner' at noon and 'supper' in the evening; no sugar, no salt even; starvation would soon begin. I would certainly go into a decline, from want of food, air and exercise, and be taken to the hospital to die.

The sufferings occasioned by real hunger are terrible; I knew them well, and having to face them in solitude is terrible also, with no books to distract one's thoughts, no one to talk to, feeling perfectly helpless, with nothing but the thought: 'I am hungry.' The prospect was awful; I paced up and down my cell and again began puzzling out my opinions and ideas.

I suddenly remembered yesterday's experience, yesterday's gleam of faith. I remembered it well, but could not recall the feeling. I tried to recall my faith; it did not come. I tried to remember Christ's teaching, but could only call to mind what was incomprehensible to me. It was only meant for

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

saints and heroes. It was all spiritual, it spoke of prayer, resignation, renouncement. I wanted nothing of all that; I wanted life and freedom. I wanted to be directed in ordinary life, something practical.

But I had understood it all yesterday. I had felt the presence of God. He is the foundation of everything; the Spirit; the example of the saints; prayer, abstinence, self-restraint, all these are means to an end, they help us to realize the nearness of God. His spiritual presence. They would enable me to begin a new life. This seemed clear to me now.

But what was fate then? was that also ordered by God? if so, why was I here? what had I done to be so tried? The answer came: 'It was not God's vengeance that had brought me here, but His love.' I had been on the brink of ruin. I had become a thief, a robber, and was stopped just in time. God had saved me from myself.

I began to understand more and more clearly. I realized that all came from God, that He was the foundation and origin of all, and for the first time in my life I could in all sincerity, and from the bottom of my heart and with my whole soul, glorify Him.

My ideas were cut short by the call of: 'Get ready for bed!' that echoed along the passages; there were five stories and the call echoed and reechoed along the hanging bridge-like landings. I undressed, lay down and continued my reflections.

I now saw clearly that God had come to my rescue. I remembered my infernal plan and the remem-

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

brance made my flesh creep. But then why had God not helped me to find some money? there was no harm in that. I had only wanted to be free and happy, and what had He brought me to now?

This reflection was followed by the thought: 'But what is happiness after all? Is it money? Most certainly not. Does it consist in power? No, not that either.' When had I really been happy? When I was with people I was fond of. When I was at peace with all around me. And when else? When I had loved people and experienced their affection. This then was the foundation of happiness. Love; and God was Love. The spirit of love had nothing to do with money, power, food. It could be in me; part of me; it was true liberty; it was obtainable by all and why not by me. The means of attaining it was to follow Christ's teaching.

Time went on; my cell did not change. I heard nothing but the words: 'Hot water!' 'Dinner!' 'Supper!' and 'Get ready for bed!' at the appointed time for each. I did not know what awaited me. I was beginning to feel the effect of hunger and suffered considerably from the cold. My outward circumstances were no better, but my inward life was quite different. I was trying, struggling to attain that peace of mind that I had glimpsed, in my first two days in the cell. At first these moments of spiritual peace and contentment were rare and far between and the agonizing and seemingly hopeless struggle with myself lasted long hours; but gradually these periods of despondency grew shorter

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

and I was able to shake them off. I recalled my former life; how sinful and empty it seemed to me now! I could not continue my old life; if I was to live, I would have to change. I would have to begin all over again; follow the way indicated by Christ, the way of love, forgiveness and charity. I made plans for the life I was to lead. If I were exiled I would enter a hospital and wait on the sick, would give them all I could; my time, my care, all the money I had. I would never lead the life I had led up till now; I wanted no luxuries for myself, I only wanted to attain the joy of being a true Christian. That was the best a man could attain on earth.

I had lately re-read Dostoyevsky's *Memoirs from the House of Death*. I had failed to understand him before; but now every word, every thought of his seemed to be the reflection of my own thoughts and ideas.

One serious reason I had for anxiety and misgiving. This question tormented me. If I were shot, it would be an end to it all; it would mean that it was God's will that it should be so. But if I lived, nothing could prevent me from joining the only woman I loved. She was abroad now. I reproached myself for not having run away to her before, without waiting for money; we could have been happy without it. I could not give her up; that was beyond my power. If circumstances kept me from her I should never be able to tear my love from my heart; the wound would remain for ever.

By the light of my new faith I bitterly regretted

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

my former treatment of and relations with women. They had been wrong from beginning to end. I had thought, before, that I really knew how to love well. But I saw how mistaken I had been. What had I asked of a woman? I had wanted her to love me deeply and faithfully and to trust me in all things. I wanted her to be wholly and unreservedly mine, to love, to idolize, but also to do whatever I liked with her. I would love her more than all besides in return, far more than myself; but she must belong to me, be my chattel. How had I gone to work to obtain this? Why, by violence and even sometimes by blows!

I understood now how mistaken I had been. But was a woman ever kept and captivated by softness and love? I could not believe this possible. I came to understand that it was not only possible, but the only real way. Only this could lead to mutual happiness. The true Christian spirit was necessary here. It would not be a proof of weakness or effeminacy, but of true manliness and strength. I asked God to show me the right way of loving.

I longed to atone for all my transgressions and to begin anew; to live a good, peaceful, loving, home life. Often and often I asked myself the question: Could I kill my love? If I did so I should be free; nothing on earth would bind me. I could go on living in solitary confinement, in this same cell, and be happy. I would fear nothing then. But I clearly saw I could not; my love was part of myself. And only God could definitely separate us.



MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

When I had been about six weeks in my cell Lange again sent for me. He knew well that I was feeling the effects of hunger and would be more pliant; something might perhaps be got out of me. He shook hands with me and said:

'You will tell me where you were staying in Petrograd, now, won't you? I give you my word of honour that it will go no further, if only you tell me.' His voice and manner sounded most sincere.

'I cannot tell you that,' I answered quietly but firmly.

'Well, read these then and sign them.' He handed me two sheets of paper, on one of which I read: 'The Ogpu, having examined the case of the prisoner calling himself Bezsonoff, sees fit to keep him confined in the "special" story of the Chpalernaia prison under the name of "Unknown N. 11."

On the other was written: 'Bezsonoff is accused of having escaped from exile and of having, on his return to Petrograd, plotted against the Soviet Government in the interests of the International Bourgeoisie. On being arrested he refused to give sufficient information about himself, on the plea that he did not wish to betray his accomplices.'

This was worse than before. I did not like the mention of counter-revolution, plots, accomplices. The affair was taking a disagreeable turn. We parted, however, as the best of friends.

The third time I saw him, he told me that he had nearly done with my case and was leaving for Moscow. If I still persisted in refusing to say where I

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

had lived, he gave me his word that he would come back with a sentence of death for me. He offered to send me a rope, and I might hang myself if I liked; that was all he could do for me. He was visibly irritated and angry with me. He had not succeeded in getting any information out of me. These promises were not kept, no rope was sent and I continued in my cell.

Winter was advancing, the cold was hard to bear, the food was as bad and as scanty as ever. My thoughts were not cheerful ones. I paced up and down my cell and avoided even looking out of the window and knocking at my neighbours' walls; these occupations seemed to call me back to life and I was trying to lead my thoughts away from it.

The complete solitude began to weigh on me. I wanted to talk to someone, I grew weaker daily. On the whole my mind was at peace, but fits of depression often assailed me. At these times I prayed and it generally did me good. Some days were worse than others; I remember a severe fit of depression that I could not shake off, just before the event that God must have sent, in order to lighten my burden.

Having lived through all as I have done, I am firmly persuaded that everything in the world is done according to God's will; what other explanation can there be of the visible and direct interposition of some Higher Power in my affairs. Once a happy coincidence, another time a lucky chance came to my rescue, and these events generally took place at

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

times when I was utterly hopeless and saw no way open to me, at moments when help from outside was expected least of all.

When a reasonable grown-up man says: 'I was saved by the merest chance,' 'It must have been my fate,' 'Circumstances helped me out of that,' he is heard and believed; but if he says 'God saved me,' even devout Christians smile incredulously. I will say outright: 'In this case God saved me.' I was in despair, I had lost all hope and was suffering from cold and hunger. I tried my best to turn to Him, but was weak and human. At that moment God helped me, relieved my sufferings and kept me from complete desperation.

One evening I heard the door open and saw the warder come in, bringing another man with him. He was a prisoner, who was to share my captivity! This was as pleasant as it was unexpected. Even now I can only explain it by it being probably a mistake on the part of the authorities.

At first I thought the other had been brought in to act as a spy; to induce me to give more information; or rather to get some more information out of me. As I afterwards found out, he had had the same suspicions regarding me. I did not think so long, however. My companion was a young boy, with a pleasant open face. I greeted him and gave him my stool to sit upon. He sat down, but soon jumped up again and walked up and down the cell. He seemed excited.

'You have never been in prison before?' I asked.

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

'Never! What are the conditions like here?' I told him.

'We must protest! We *must* protest!' he kept on repeating.

We talked all that evening. He told me all the news; everything that had happened in the world since I had been away from it. I told him all I had to tell about the prison. Neither of us mentioned our cases; we were not sure enough of each other yet. He fell sound asleep as soon as he lay down. We made friends next day and my life became much more bearable.

My new companion was a member of the Social-Democrat Party, and therefore a 'political prisoner.' He was a fervent Socialist, knew his Marx almost by heart, and had read most of the authors on Socialism. He was a nice boy. He had been turned out of his college for refusing to enter the Communist Party. These 'clearances' were periodically made! The Communist Party getting rid of all those who did not wish to join them. He was of peasant origin, and, after this forced termination of his education, had earned his living as a day labourer. He was a pure innocent boy, and I found out that neither he, nor his friends, had ever had anything to do with women.

He was also innocent enough to think that his protests would prevail with the prison authorities; I did not contradict him, and left him to try and do what he could. He at once asked for pen, ink and paper and wrote a 'protest' against the

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

prison regulations; nothing came of it, as I had supposed.

My companion suffered as much as I did from the absence of food. He was not very strong. At the end of a fortnight he was sent for and questioned; he came back looking very upset. He had been accused of a quantity of crimes. I comforted him and told him it was their usual way; they always accused people of crimes they could not possibly have committed; it was only to make them speak and give as much information as possible. As the result of this interrogation he enjoyed the privileges of 'political prisoners' ('counter-revolutionaries' excepted), and had better food. I was the gainer by this change too.

All the time I was in Soviet Russia I had a secret pocket. It had often been of great use to me and was so now. I had brought some money in this pocket and was now able to make use of it. K-v had no money, but was allowed to buy anything he wanted, through the warders. So, thanks to this, we were able to buy some supplementary food, and shared it.

Food could be bought twice a week. I shall never forget how impatiently we waited for it, the first time we were able to avail ourselves of this privilege. We had ordered some bread, butter and sugar. As soon as it was brought in we sat down to enjoy it; the bread was buttered and sugar sprinkled thickly over it all. It was very good! Those who have not experienced real hunger will not under-

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

stand us; we used to eat as much as four pounds of bread a day each.

K – v's regular prison rations were also quite good now; he had two pounds of bread, soup with meat in it, sugar, *kasha* and even some tobacco. But this was not all; we had books and newspapers. K – v was taken out for walks in the prison yard. We were allowed to keep the light burning till 11 p.m. I have very pleasant recollections of those evenings. We read and talked, and caught lice. K – v's clothes were full of them, so were mine.

We were very much amused one evening. The English delegates, Purcell and Co., were visiting Russia. The papers were full of them and their admiration for everything they saw. They went to the Caucasus and admired the independence and loyalty of the Georgians. They visited the factories and admired the rise of industrialism and the productivity of labour. They went to see several children's homes and were lost in admiration. All this admiration was expressed in speeches, letters, or newspaper articles.

We were talking about these Englishmen, and in our turn admiring the cleverness of the Bolsheviks in showing everything to the best advantage. They must have several show places to which to take foreigners. I began to read one of the papers aloud. There was a letter by Ben Tillet. His admiration for all he had seen, in Soviet Russia, made us smile. Unfortunately I do not remember the whole of the letter. When we came to a sentence beginning:

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

'Your exceptionally mild and humane prison regime . . .' it made us laugh outright. We laughed till we cried; we laughed like two hysterical women. We tried to read on, but could not stop laughing. K-v fairly shrieked with laughter: 'Oh! Oh! Bring him here! Let him see the "mildness" of the regime we are under!' and we went on laughing, though there was more bitterness than glee in our laughter. I shall always remember Ben Tillet as the man who can make me laugh in the grimdest surroundings.

K-v and I became great friends; a prison is a place where a man is seen as he really is; in his true colours. We trusted each other completely now and confided our innermost thoughts to one another. Sometimes we had very interesting conversations and discussions. I wanted to have my faith proved and exposed to criticism. I had sometimes thought that I might be wrong, that the materialistic teachings of Socialism might be nearer the truth, and more conducive to human happiness. Christ's teaching had been repudiated by so many.

I had a serious opponent; he was young, well-read, a good talker and a staunch believer in the doctrine he preached.

But the more I argued with him, the firmer grew my own belief. I was more and more persuaded that Christianity was a living reality and considered Socialism to be a materialistic utopia.

'God does not exist; there is no conscience, no future life.'

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

'Then why do you not kill me for a dozen cigarettes? You only live once, you want to smoke, you will not be answerable before the Law; why not kill me and have another smoke?'

He tried to talk of the law of mutual help and fellowship; said that it was a natural Law, but could find no really convincing argument.

He was very fond of Dostoyevsky and often talked of him and his writings, but could not stand my mentioning *The Possessed*; he called it an immoral, inartistic work, and could not imagine Dostoyevsky's having written it. My saying that Dostoyevsky had been a prophet of the Revolution drove him perfectly wild.

I asked him to explain the difference between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (to whom he belonged). He tried to maintain that the difference was between revolution and evolution; one party stood for the former and the other for the latter.

'But you admit violence?'

'Yes, but only to get power and the necessary implements of labour into our hands.'

'And what then, when they come into your power?'

'We will then renounce violence.'

'Why?'

'There will be no need for it. When all power and all the implements of labour are in our hands, classes will no longer exist; in the light of present-day technical knowledge, everyone will work two hours a day, according to his capacity, and will have sufficient for his needs.'

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

'But do you not think it possible that a group of people, some trade-union, for instance, might object to working and, taking the power into its hands, make everyone else work.'

'Your reasoning is childish!'

'You are right; children are always logical. You must admit that such a thing is possible; take, for instance, a union of chemical workers; they could easily use the results of their labour to become masters; they would constitute a new class of tyrants and impose their will on all others.'

I often thought that this man before me was in every respect my superior; he was giving up the liberty he prized so highly, for the sake of an idea, for the sake of his fellow-men. I believe in life beyond the grave; could it be possible that he, unbeliever though he was, would not reap his reward in after life. I puzzled over it for a long time and at last came to the conclusion, that, as Christ's foremost commandment is love of one's neighbour, his responsibility for his want of faith would be but slight; it would all be borne by those who had led him on. The responsibility of those who have put their own laws in the place of God's will be terrible. I am sure to be laughed at; but I always pray for the repose of Lenin's soul.

K – v only stayed about six weeks with me; he was then taken to Moscow, and I was alone again. Lange thought that, if I were kept long enough, I should end by saying all they wanted. Dostoyevsky calls prison a school of patience. Lange had no idea

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

that I had had a respite and company and decent food for some time. Even now I was better off than I had been, before K-v came to join me. I had dried and hoarded some of the bread and had a piece of soap too. My shirt was falling to pieces.

The longer I stayed there, the nearer I was to death. I was getting to fear it less and less. At first I had tried not to think of it, but it had been difficult and now I had the courage to look it full in the face. What if I were shot? would I be afraid? I hoped not; it would be God's will. The proceedings would be rather unpleasant; being led away to execution; meeting the men who were to kill me; the first shot. Was I anxious to live? I thought not. I was alive and would still be so. The principal thing was not to lose my peace of mind, and the best way of keeping it was to have no will of one's own, but to submit entirely to God's.

What were to be my plans if I were let out of prison? Why, to get away abroad as soon as possible! A new life would begin there, a life full of love. But ought I to escape from the conditions in which God had placed me? Could I renounce my love? No, I was quite sure of that! I could struggle with any feeling and get the better of it, but not of my love; it was stronger than myself. It was not much use to think of that now, it all seemed far enough away.

What had my faith consisted in, up till now? I had learnt the Catechism at school. When I was in the regiment I had gone to church, when it had been my turn to go with the soldiers. During the

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

War I had had the first glimmerings of faith; that is, when death seemed imminent, I had thought of God. I considered it a sign of weakness of spirit to pray and cross myself during battle; I used to do so at night though. This was about all I had ever known or thought about God.

I was trying with all my might to grow spiritually. I remember the notes I made at that time, on some cigarette paper; promises that were to be kept, if I ever were free again. They are simple, as all Christianity is simple; I am quite sure it is the only possible way to happiness; here they are:

'I must submit my will to God's. Always turn to what is kind, loving, forgiving, merciful, humble, peacemaking; in a word, to God. My conscience will always direct me in the right way, and the way to God is through love and truth.' I promised to love those I came across and to forgive all offences, whatever they were; never to quarrel, nor to speak ill of anyone; always do to others as I would have them do to me; never to use violence; always to try and influence people for good. I must consider myself inferior to everyone, give all I had without grudging, allow myself no dissipation, neither to swear nor to lie. I also promised not to try to get out of the conditions in which God had placed me. I promised to live with a minimum of luxury, to eat only as much as was absolutely necessary, to sleep on a hard bed, to drink no wine, to keep a time for prayer every day. How many of these promises have I kept?

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

I asked God to help me, to let me keep that freedom of spirit that I had acquired in prison. I prayed; but my prayers were not always sincere. I was ready to renounce everything in the world, but could not renounce or give up my love. That love kept me attached to the world.

I cannot refrain from relating a strange experience I had on the night of the 3rd-4th of December. The reader is at liberty to believe it or not and to explain it as he will. K-v was still with me then. We had been in bed some time; K-v was asleep. I suddenly felt an overpowering terror; the horror was so great that I, wishing to wake K-v, understood that it would be perfectly useless to do so; there was no getting away from that awful fear! I tried to pray with all my might, I called upon God to come to my rescue; I soon felt less terrified. Then it all began over again; I went on praying and felt soothed for a time. But it began a third time; it did not last long however. I went on praying, and experienced a great joy; an ecstasy of gladness; it was an unearthly bliss I felt. On the wall I saw an image of the Blessed Virgin and a voice within me said: 'You can ask for whatever you wish now.' I asked for nothing, I had no wish!

*

On the 16th of March I was ordered to appear at the office. I was told to sign a paper, on which I read that I had been found guilty, under paragraphs 220, 61 and 95 of the Penal Code, and was sentenced to be shot, but that the sentence had been

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

commuted to a term of three years' penal servitude in the Solovetski 'special' camp.

Paragraph 220 dealt with keeping fire-arms; I had never kept any. Paragraph 61 was about taking part in counter-revolutionary plots; I had taken part in no plots. Escape from jail was the subject of paragraph 95.

Why was I accused of two crimes I had not committed, and why was the sentence mitigated? But it is no use asking *why*, in Soviet Russia. Having read and refused, as usual, to sign it, I asked to be taken to Lange. I wanted to try and secure some warm clothing. His study was more comfortable and better furnished than it had been formerly; he was probably on the high road to a career. I asked him why he had added paragraph 220 to my accusations; his answer was:

'I knew nothing about it.'

The first time he questioned me, he had said that if, on having escaped from Siberia, I had come straight to him, I would not have been punished for it. On the strength of these words, I now said that, if I ran away another time, I should come to his private house and report myself. That was the first time I saw him really angry; his eyes flashed, his hands shook, but he restrained himself and only said:

'I strongly advise you to do nothing of the sort!
Good-bye.'

I was told to be ready by eight o'clock in the evening. I had no preparations to make, and had

SIX MONTHS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

plenty of time to think over the coming change and to reflect upon the time I had passed in solitary confinement.

My destination was the celebrated convict 'camp' of Solovetski, renowned for its exceptionally severe regime. It was the worst of all the Bolshevik convict prisons and there was not much hope of ever coming back to life, after a year or two spent in those dreadful conditions; with no help from outside, no warm clothes in that awful climate, I would not be able to stand it. Yes, I would though! 'You are morally stronger than you ever were before,' said I to myself. 'God knows what we can stand; He does not try us beyond our strength; you must accept this change of circumstances joyfully, as coming from Him. God is sure to be with you. Compare yourself now with what you were before, and ask yourself whether you would choose the last six months, or all the pleasures on earth.'

But it was hard nevertheless!

CHAPTER XXII

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

WE started. Everything was the same outwardly: the prison yard, the escort, the railway station; but I was different, my ideas and general outlook on life were changed. I think my thoughts were clearer and simpler; I tried to have a kind thought for all whom I came across. I was trying to be a Christian in the true sense of the word. My reason was against the new course I had adopted and I knew it would be very hard to keep my resolutions, in the life that was before me. But my mind was at peace; God was with me and I would win.

The carriage door was opened and something heavy was carried in by several men. What it was I could not make out; I heard one of them say: 'There, it is no use making any more fuss; throw her down!' There was a thud as of something soft and heavy falling to the ground, and then the retreating footsteps of the men who had brought the load in were heard. I looked out into the passage and saw one of our escort walking sideways, his arm stretched out, dragging something along the floor. I went over to see what it was. It was an insensible woman! Her dress was torn, her legs and arms were bound.

There were three women in the carriage with us; this one had refused to be taken to the station, had been forced into submission by blows, bound and, in spite of the frost, carried out with nothing but her

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

dress on, thrown on a sledge and brought to the station. She had fainted on the way.

One of the other women told us her own story. She was a peasant's widow and had a baby. She had been on the brink of starvation in her own village, so taking her child with her, had entered the service of the neighbouring schoolmaster, who was a Communist. He worried her with advances, which she repelled. He revenged himself on her; she was accused of smuggling, arrested and sent to the Solovetski convict 'camp.' Children were not allowed there, so she was sent back to Pskov, with the assurance that her case would be examined again and that she would in all likelihood be acquitted. When she arrived in Pskov she was sent for, to be questioned and, suspecting nothing, gave her child to a fellow-prisoner to mind, while she was away. She was not kept long; but on her return did not find the child, could not find out where it had been taken and never saw it again. She was now being taken to Solovetski and begged anyone who was able to do anything for her, to help her. I am now writing this, in case it may reach someone who can help her to find her child.

Our carriage was coupled to a passenger train and in three days we had reached Kem, the nearest town to the islands, of which the first is Popov Island. Soon after our arrival, two drunken individuals penetrated into our carriage and, having noisily welcomed the chief of our escort, asked him whether he had brought any women, and insisted on seeing

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

them. There was a very good-looking fair young woman, whose husband had just been shot, and who was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment; she had eluded all attention on the journey and had seemed exceedingly unhappy. One of the men went up to the grated window of the women's compartment and said: 'Turn round; let us have a look at you!' The woman did not move, she was sitting with her back to the window. The man said again: 'Turn round, I tell you!' – 'She has refused to show her face all the way,' said our chief. 'Oh, she will look round soon enough, never fear,' said the other, 'she is a beauty.' With this, he turned away and began inspecting us and asking what we had been sent to prison for. When one of us answered that it was for anti-revolutionary opinions, he said: 'Oh, just like me; how pleasant, for how long?' – 'Three years,' was the answer. 'So was I; but, when two had elapsed, three more were added, so that makes four! Well good-bye; we shall meet again soon!' They both went off.

'That is your future chief,' said one of the soldiers; 'they have gone after a prisoner who escaped this morning. He is a former officer too.'

I was completely puzzled. A former officer; our future chief, helping to bring runaways back! If it were possible to run away, why did he not avail himself of the chance? I only understood it all later on, when I had been some days in the 'camp.' This is what I found out: there were only three men on Popov Island who were officially invested with

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

authority from the Government; all the other posts were occupied by convicts; that is, by those of them who were willing to tyrannize over and persecute the other poor wretches; in return for this dirty work they were better fed and had a sleeping-berth to themselves; the others were only allowed 14 inches of sleeping-room, on the shelves. Some cannot resist the temptation, and it is difficult to blame them; hunger and fear of death often force men into mean and dastardly actions! This system the Bolsheviks have adopted and practise in all departments, but it is especially useful to them in the Solovetski 'Penal Camp.'

The man we had seen was Vanka T – v, our future chief; he came to a bad end, being ultimately shot by the Bolsheviks. He had been an officer; was sentenced to penal servitude for having been in the White Army; hunger had driven him to this compromise and he had quickly risen in his career. I cannot however say that he was utterly bad; he never persecuted his fellow counter-revolutionaries and his end proves that there must have been some good in him; he was not bad enough for the post he occupied and, being useless to the Government, they got rid of him, in the surest way.

The short Arctic day was drawing to its close; it was nearly dusk when, at four o'clock, we were told to get out of the train. The usual proceedings of parading us and counting us took some time. At last the escort was ready and we started to walk to our final destination. It was only a mile from the

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

railway and the high wooden wall and solid gateway of the Solovetski 'special camp' soon came into sight.

The thought of entering that notorious jail, from which there was very little chance of ever escaping, made us all feel very dejected and downhearted; even the real criminals, who always make the best of everything and feel at home in all kinds of prisons, looked depressed and melancholy. I wondered whether I could perhaps be shut up in that gloomy place for all the rest of my life, and tried to comfort myself with the thought that it was only for three years. We stopped at the gate, the sentry on duty saw us from his watch-tower and tolled a great bell; the gate was opened, we passed through and it was shut and locked after us. We were shut in, with not much hope of ever getting out!

Popov Island is one of the Solovetski group; it covers an area of about two by one and a half miles. It is joined to the mainland by a mole and railway bridge. In former times it used to serve as a place of embarkation for monks and pilgrims, on their way to the well-known monastery of Solovetski. Now it is the worst 'penal camp' of the whole group. The camp is situated on the south-west side of the island; it is all solid rock; there is not a tree nor a bush growing on it; it is separated by a wire fence from the sea and a tall wooden wall separates it from the rest of the island. Just outside the wall are watch-towers for sentinels. Inside the gate are quarters for the escort and the office; the Cheka barracks are a

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

little further on with those inhabited by the women convicts; still further on are two big barracks for the convicts. The centre of the 'camp' is occupied by the workshops, electric station, kitchen, bathhouse, storehouse and cells for special punishments.

This camp was begun during the construction of the Petrograd-Murmansk railway and the barracks were built then; it was continued during the British occupation of the Northern Provinces; electricity was put in then, and last of all the Bolsheviks added the cells. That was their only contribution!

The prison authorities received us inside the gates; they counted and inspected us. Members of the Cheka, the local 'aristocracy,' came to meet us; they were dressed in various costumes, but all had some red on their caps or somewhere about them. They amused themselves by reviewing and drilling us. It was a hideous spectacle; they made game of us, jeered, howled, imitated military commands. There were about a hundred of us, hungry, exhausted, half-frozen men; they must have been about twenty-five; what they wanted and what we were expected to do, neither we nor they knew. They were utterly degraded; brutalized creatures who found pleasure in screaming, shrieking, yelling and taunting us. Suddenly two or three of them shrieked out: 'Attention' and imitated the military salute. One of the assistant chiefs came up. He was a former member of the Cheka too, who had been imprisoned for theft and had succeeded in making his career. 'What are you doing? How dare you

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

stand like that? And you too? and you,' he shouted. 'You are not to forget that you are in a "special camp." I will teach you to remember; take him to the cells and this one too, and this one!' All this was interspersed with the choicest oaths and curses; several subordinates at once flew to do his bidding; the rest of us were taken into the barracks and searched. I had absolutely nothing belonging to me; but one of the other prisoners had asked me to take charge of part of his property.

'How much money have you?' asked the man who searched me.

'I have none at all,' said I.

'That is a lie! I see by your face that you have money. If I find any it will be the worse for you!'

The prison was run on a military basis. We were all divided into companies; this was in order to tyrannize over us with more semblance of right. I was taken to the barrack of the 7th company, to which I had been assigned. It was a large building, 100 feet by 20. In spite of the severe frost the door was kept open, but still the air was awful! Two electric lamps shone dimly through the hazy atmosphere. The stench was overpowering; unwashed humanity, fish, old clothes, bad tobacco and damp; it was a combination of all these smells.

Evening call-over was about to begin; all the prisoners were there; the sleeping-boards were full, the men lying or sitting on them. Their faces looked worn and exhausted. There was a crowd near each of the lamps; it was composed of naked

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

bodies; their owners were catching and killing the lice they found on their clothes! One end of the barrack was screened off and occupied by the 'aristocracy' (those of the prisoners who had authority over the rest). There was a table near the window, at the other end; another favoured corner, occupied by those who could pay for it. The whole place was badly built; there were large cracks in the walls, with dirty rags stuck into them to keep the cold out as much as possible. This was to be my 'home'!

The conversation among the convicts centred on the expected change in the Penal Code; some of them came up to me and asked what I had heard about it. I answered that, having been in solitary confinement, I knew absolutely nothing. Their faith in this coming change was absolute; the authorities encouraged them in it. There is a limit to human patience and men are more dangerous and ready for revolt if this limit is over-reached; so the prison authorities kept up this faith for their own benefit. The convicts expected their terms of imprisonment to be shortened when the Code was changed. A man cannot live without some hope or other.

A bell rang and our company commander came in and shouted: 'Stand up for call-over.' The tired, sleepy men got down slowly and unwillingly from their boards. It was clear that even their fear of punishment had been blunted by much abuse; they seemed indifferent to everything.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

'Hurry up there or I shall turn you all out into the cold!' shouted the 'captain.' 'And you, Kalinka, what are you thinking of? How dare you not come at once?' he screamed at an old man, who moved slowly and painfully along; 'have you made your coffin? Not yet? Then be quick about it, I shall soon drive you into one! Never fear!' The old man seemed to have reached the limit of endurance and, turning to his tormentor, said:

'Are you not ashamed to make fun of me at my age?'

'Oh, you answer me back, do you? Take him to the cells at once; open the window! No, wait a moment, I will take him there myself; when I have done here!'

The revolting scene disgusted even the most experienced among us. We were kept waiting about an hour. At last a party of members of the Cheka came in, making as much noise as they could with their spurs! I wondered why they wore spurs! The man on duty went up to report; they all aped military proceedings. The effect was most ludicrous and might have been highly comical if it had not been so tragic. All our lives depended on the merest caprice of any one of these mountebanks.

The 'Chekist' on duty counted us as we stood in rows, and the whole party went out with a great noise of spurs. Our 'captain' then turned again to the unfortunate old man: 'Come along, Kalinka, it is no good dressing, you will not be allowed to keep your clothes on. Come on!' The old man came up

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

obediently; I saw the brute seize him by the collar and push him down the steps with such force that he fell down. This man was well known for the savage treatment he gave all in his power; his name was Osnova. He now led the old man away, so as to beat him, before leaving him to spend the night in one of the cells. These cells had been built for shutting up the convicts, as a special punishment. They were made of boards carelessly knocked together, were not heated, the window was usually kept open and the victim undressed.

I lay down to sleep on the only existing table, as there was no room on the boards for me; not even the 14 inches to which I was entitled. People slept almost on top of each other; the air was stifling. Moans and cries were often heard; whether they proceeded from those who were asleep, or those awake, it was hard to say; what was certain was that they were cries of distress and suffering. The men who had toiled all day in the frost had their well-earned rest: 14 inches of hard boards in a stinking, crowded, draughty den. This was the 'merciful prison régime.' I tried not to rebel, but could not help objecting to the present conditions. I knew it was my duty to try and bear them; God had placed me there and would surely help me through. That night I firmly resolved to keep my good resolutions and find comfort in helping my neighbour. But what if I should not be able to bear it all? Was I going to turn a coward and bully like Osnova, was I going to ill-treat and tyrannize

M Y T W E N T Y - S I X P R I S O N S

over my present fellow-sufferers? No, decidedly that I could not do, not in any circumstance; that solution was out of the question. But if death threatened me it would be suicide not to accept a compromise. I soon realized, however, that suffering for the truth would not be suicide; I had only to do what was right and honourable and leave the rest to God. I had only to submit to His will and, if necessary, suffer and even die. I spent most of the night cherishing these thoughts and only fell asleep towards morning.

A bell was rung at 6 a.m. (5 a.m. in summer), the signal for getting up. Most of the captives got up very unwillingly and at the last possible moment; some were seen going early to fetch some hot water for breakfast. Water was brought from Kem by railway; there was none on our island. We were only allowed hot water once a day, and there was not always enough to go round, so the late-comers often got none. At other times we had nothing to drink, unless we liked to melt some snow. If we wanted hot water in the evening to warm us after having been out all day, we could buy some in the kitchen. There was no water for washing either; in winter snow served this purpose.

There was call-over again at daybreak; we were supposed to be ready, standing in rows for half an hour before it really began. All the commanders and chiefs amused themselves by screaming and shouting orders at us. The day's work was distributed after this; there was plenty of work for everyone;

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

preparing and bringing firewood, carrying water, making brooms, breaking ice. The bell was rung a second time, and all the badly dressed, hungry, worn-out men were led out, under escort, to work in the severe frost, with the sea roaring all round, the wind blowing and the temperature (when I arrived in March) about -10° C. The first day, I was taken to work with a gang who had to prepare blocks of ice for the camp authorities. We had to saw it into blocks first, then take it out of the water with harpoons. Our feet were wet and slipped on the ice, our hands were frozen, the work was hard; the great blocks of ice were heavy and sometimes slipped back into the water, when there was no getting them back.

At other times we were sawing, collecting and storing firewood. The man who superintended our work said that it was to be stacked in one place; then his superior would come and say that it was all to be carried to another place, and a third would come and order all to be put into its former place; this often happened. Sometimes we had to clear the camp and clean it out well. We were always hungry, and never had any bread with us.

The work was divided into two categories: that done inside the walls of the camp and 'outside' work. When it was in the camp members of the Cheka superintended our work. They were also prisoners and had been arrested for some misdemeanour. They did their best to toady to the authorities in the hope of being released; they bullied us and spied upon us and were our worst

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

enemies. The 'outside' work was superintended by the soldiers forming our guard.

Some of the work was done at night. A commission of inspection was expected from Moscow and our chiefs wanted to make the place look less neglected and to improve the look of the whole island, so they ordered paths to be laid out. About a thousand men worked at these paths for a whole month, the work was carried on day and night.

At noon the bell rang for dinner. The 'Chekists' were served first of all and had the best of everything; they went to their quarters carrying little barrels full of fish. A crowd of convicts followed, swearing, vociferating and, sometimes, showing their right to be better served, by blows. We got our soup last of all. When first I came to Popov Island, I had no spoon of my own and had nothing to eat my soup with. Prisoners are not provided with any necessities there; they can buy what they like at the canteen and procure money in whatever way they like. Three of us used to eat out of the same bowl; we were supposed to have fish in our soup, but seldom had anything but a few dried vegetables.

Many of our companions had scurvy; only just beginning with some, their gums being swollen; but others could hardly move and were all doubled-up.

Work began again after dinner. At 5 p.m. supper was given us. A thick gruel with no butter, not even oil; very like putty. There was nothing to drink; we all longed for a little hot water after supper. Once a week we were given a wine-glass full of

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

sugar. The food was far from sufficient. Most of the prisoners had relations, who, by depriving themselves, sent them food and money. The fortunate ones often shared their provisions with those who had nothing of their own and there was generally some bread over; so there were no cases of death from absolute starvation.

I do not know what the prisoners are supposed to have; I only know what they get in practice. If a foreign mission were to come and inspect the Solovetski Penal Camp, it would be shown something quite different and would go away with an impression of 'a mild and humane prison regime.' The only way of really finding out the truth is to see for oneself, to really want to know the truth; for instance, to try and lead the life of a convict in the Solovetski camp for a few weeks; that would be a thrilling and truly instructive experience for some; they would see much that would surprise them.

After evening call-over, no one was allowed out, on any pretext whatever.

There were about 6,000 convicts on all the Solovetski Islands; 1,500 of them were on Popov Island. All the convicts could be divided into several categories: in the first place there were members of the Cheka, or workers of the 'Ogpu,' who had been imprisoned for abuse of power, or bribery; they were a privileged class: they did not work and all held more or less responsible posts under the camp authorities. They did duty as guards inside the camp and superintended the work done within the walls.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

Less privileged were the 'political prisoners.' The Soviet Government recognizes, as 'political' prisoners, only Socialists of other groups than the Bolshevik or Communist Party. They alone with the exception of a small group of Anarchists enjoy the privileges that are accorded to political prisoners in all countries. Few of them are ever shot. They are well-dressed and better fed; their rations are quite sufficient. The reason for their being so treated is that they are protected by their fellow-Socialists in Europe. The Soviet Government tries to curry favour with the working men and their organizations in other countries; these in their turn insist on their Russian partisans being decently treated, even in prison. There were about a hundred and fifty of these Socialists on Popov Island, both men and women; they were in no danger of being shot for any slight offence, they did not work, and were an organized body; we were allowed no intercourse with them.

We 'counter-revolutionaries' were the worst off; we were outside the law in every respect. No one protected, or showed any interest in, us. We were liable to be shot for any trifling offence. If a 'professional' convict attempted an escape his term was prolonged; but if any one of us tried anything of the sort, he could be sure of being shot. We kept our mouths closed, for on the slightest disobedience we risked our lives. Our term might always be increased for a hasty word. That is why so many accept the compromise and go over to the enemy; it would be unfair to blame them too severely.

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

The term 'counter-revolutionaries' includes those who have been accused of plotting against the Government; all the so-called 'spies,' 'political bandits,' those who in any way helped or openly sympathized with them, and those, also, who stood up for the Church and so incurred the displeasure of its persecutors. All the clergy were in this category; the officers of the White Army, many Cossacks, a good many returned *émigrés*, and others.

I have good reasons for not mentioning any of these 'counter-revolutionaries' by name, but can say that to my knowledge there was not a single man among them who had committed any real crime. Those who really take any active part in anti-Communist plots, white organizations, rebellions, or risings, are immediately shot; there is no other punishment for them. So all those who are sent to Solovetski are either absolutely innocent of the 'crimes' of which they are accused, or are guilty of very slight offences against the Government.

Quite apart from all the other captives are the real criminals — thieves, robbers, etc. They are a disciplined body, have laws of their own and, as they know that they will spend a great part of their lives in prison, try to make themselves as comfortable as they can. This is what the counter-revolutionaries will not understand; if they were as disciplined and well organized as the 'professionals' are the authorities would be in fear of them as a body, and they would be able to obtain certain rights and privileges; at the cost of one or two lives, perhaps;

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

but the majority would be better off in the long run.

The criminals do not work on Popov Island; the authorities used to try to force them, but were powerless against their stubborn refusal. Many of them have absolutely no clothes and stay in bed all day; if obliged to get up and go out, they borrow a pair of trousers from a friend. This is the result of card-playing, their favourite occupation.

Money is a terrible power in prison. Dostoyevsky remarks on it and speaks of the importance of money in relieving the sufferings of a prisoner. He also says that everything that can possibly be sold is given in exchange for a little money; things that no one would think of the least value outside a prison.

Convict prisons are not much changed since his day; the differences are only in the details of prison life. There is, however, one great difference; a convict in Dostoyevsky's time was practically sure of not being shot, and there was no risk of his being starved to death. So, if anything, money has gained in value. It used to be spent on tobacco and vodka; now it all goes to buy bread and other necessities.

There was still another category of prisoners; the Government clerks imprisoned for theft and bribery, and the 'false-coiners.' It is difficult, in my opinion, to find a man in Russia who has not broken any of the Soviet laws. Those who have not done so are prevented by the fear of punishment, certainly not by their conscience. The Government has made

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

laws impossible to obey. It had succeeded in suppressing the 'counter-revolution,' bribery and speculation, and had now declared war on 'false-coiners.'

There were about 150 women on Popov Island; their life was exceedingly hard too; for those, at least, who did not want to have a 'protector' among the members of the Cheka, or others in authority. They were made to do work not fit for them and their terms were increased on the slightest provocation. There were cases of father, mother and son being all in prison; or husband and wife, mother and daughter. They were allowed to meet once a week, officially; of course they managed to see each other oftener. No visits were allowed from outside; at least they could only be permitted by the authorities in Moscow. We could write and receive one letter a month; but of course they were all read by the authorities, and no mention might be made of the conditions we lived in.

If I am asked whether people are still shot in Russia, I would say that they are; not as often as they were some years ago, and every sentence of death has to be sanctioned from Moscow. But the fact remains that people are shot, and the worst of it is that a man can be shot without having committed any real crime! Are prisoners tortured and beaten? Yes, they are. I could mention many cases during the time I was at Solovetski. I witnessed several: I have seen men beaten after an attempted escape; I have seen others with their faces streaming with blood. I have also seen sticks broken on pris-

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

oners' backs. I have seen all these things with my own eyes and have had much to suffer. But the Bolsheviks know a man can be beaten, once or twice, and then become callous and less susceptible to fear, so they do not often resort to these measures; but the dreadful thing is that you *can* be beaten, tortured or shot at any moment, and for no special reason. This is what keeps men in subjection and continual fear. The dreadful fact is, that irresponsible despotism exists.

As Dostoyevsky says: the absence of privacy is very hard to bear for long, the fact of never being alone for a single moment. But the conditions in which Dostoyevsky lived during his term of penal servitude were different from ours; he had not the 14 inches of sleeping-room we had (we could only sleep on our sides, without moving); he and his fellow-prisoners were not half so crowded as we were; we could not even talk for fear of being overheard, and worst of all were surrounded by spies. There were spies everywhere, people who were only too anxious to report on us and so gain credit with the authorities. Some were ready to engage us in conversation and pretend to sympathize, so as to draw out confidences, and then report all that had been said.

In Russia, and more especially in the Solovetski camp, you cannot get on, if you still have a conscience. The best way to advancement is to trade on one's fellow-captives' misery. By working hard a man is able to earn his daily bread; in some coun-

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

tries it is more difficult than in others, but the possibility exists. Russia is an exception; it is not sufficient that a man should work; he must take an active part in politics; if his opinions do not coincide with those of the party in power so much the worse for him; there is neither place nor work to be found for him in the country.

*

I was torn in two; there seemed to be two personalities struggling within me: the Christian and the earthbound materialist. I spent long sleepless nights pondering over these questions. Sometimes I felt strongly that God was there, that now was the time to prove my Christian principles, now was the time to bear in patience the sufferings He had sent me. Now was the time to show my love for my neighbour, my spirit of forgiveness. This was the mood upheld by the man I wanted to be. The man I really was kept on saying that my lot was hard, that all the sufferings were not to be born. What was I to do, to be oppressed, or to oppress others? There was no middle course. But there was, though. There was the possibility of escape!

This idea never left me from the moment I came to that place of misery. The first day I was there I spoke to Captain Malsagov, who had been in the Caucasian Native Division (as I had during the War), and was a native of the Caucasus, a mountaineer. I was asking him about the work and general conditions of the camp, and very carefully touched on the question of escape. I knew that that was a topic

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

which a prisoner hardly dared mention. I found out that all the attempts at escape had not been successful. The unlucky man who had run away the day before was sure to be caught. As this dangerous subject was started, I went on with it, not knowing whether I should have another opportunity of continuing the conversation. I tried to elucidate the questions that interested me. I wanted to find out whether the captain, who had been a year at the camp, wanted to escape. I told him I had twice run away from prison and was ready to do so again; would he join me? 'It is out of the question from this camp, and I advise you never to speak of it again,' said he, getting up and going away.

A few days later I saw the poor wretch who had run away on the day of our arrival. He had been caught 50 miles away from the camp in a peasant's house, where he had gone to beg for some bread and had fallen into an ambush of soldiers, sent to catch him. This was the usual end of all attempts at flight.

My sleeping-place was just opposite the terrible Osnova's partition; we could just see one another when we were both in bed. Curiously enough, he never said a word or did anything to worry or annoy me. We used to lie looking at each other, but seldom spoke. One evening we were both lying awake; he came up to me and asked me to come and talk to him. He described the life and institutions of the camp and offered me a post of command. I refused. He wanted to know the reason for my refusal. 'I

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

consider it base to build my career on other people's misery,' said I. We had a long conversation after that, and touched on the spiritual side of man. The question seemed to interest him; I advised him to give up his post and turn all his energy to helping and benefiting his fellow-creatures. His answer was as unexpected as it was strange; he suddenly fell down on his bed and went off into a fit of convulsions, shaking and trembling all over, and finally ended in losing consciousness. For some days after that he did not speak to me; then much later on, he came up to me and said:

'Well, Bezsonoff, when are you going to run away? Do not look so surprised, it is the only possible way out for you.'

I was dumbfounded. The word escape was hardly ever mentioned, and here was this man, the terror of all the prisoners, talking about it as if it was an ordinary subject of conversation. I answered evasively, but his words had left an impression.

I went out to work every day, very much against my wishes. I felt my indignation and resentment growing: I was afraid of doing something desperate, something that would lead to my being shot.

Osnova's assistant was a young boy who had recently returned from abroad expecting to find Russia an earthly paradise; but had found himself mistaken and in a penal camp into the bargain. He did his best to gain advancement. He sent me out to work every day; I was so exhausted at last that one day I lay down and did not go to work. I saw

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

him go and complain to Osnova, who listened attentively but never said a word to me. The boy decided to punish me for this, and sent me out to work more than ever, when it was not my turn to go. I stood it for some time and then my patience was exhausted. He had given me two orders, one day, that contradicted each other, and then asked me why I did not do as I was told. I answered him with an oath and went at once to complain to one of the chiefs and told him all about it; he sided with me.

These were my first outbursts of exasperation. I was not made to suffer for them, but felt that I had definitely turned from the course of patient endurance. If so I had to act at once. But the question arose, ought I to do so? Was I justified in trying to change my destiny? had not God put me there for the purpose of bearing and suffering? This was a question I could not solve. Was I right in refusing the cross? There was something that was more than all these tormenting questions, something that pushed me on. I understood at last that it was my love.

When I had made that out, all was clear before me. I must escape. I must risk everything, in an attempt to get away. My mind was made up. There were only the details to be fixed upon and decided. It was to be done thoroughly this time; I would not let the Bolsheviks catch me in one of their traps as they had done twice before. I saw many examples of how things ought not to be done.

One day we heard shots outside and all flew to

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

the windows: we saw a wide expanse of ice and snow, a man running with all his might over it. A soldier was running after him and firing shots at him. I, of course, wished the man to succeed with all my heart. He ran on and the distance that separated him from his pursuer seemed to grow; but he suddenly stopped, flew in one direction, then tried another, and then stopped dead; the soldiers came up and began to strike him on all sides. He was hit with rifles, fell down, got up again and was brought back, the soldiers beating him all the way. Osnova broke a stick on his back the moment he came into camp and afterwards he was shot.

This was a lesson to us not to run away, without plenty of forethought and preparation. A plan had to be fixed upon. Malsagov's indifference to my proposal had surprised me. I soon found out the reason for it. He came up to me one day and, taking advantage of a moment when no one could hear us, said: 'I am willing to escape. I was afraid you were a spy when you first spoke to me.' This shows how suspicious people are (and with cause) in Russia; we had been officers in the same division of the army and had several friends in common, and still he had not trusted me, at first.

We agreed to draw up a plan. Malsagov had been over a year in the camp and was entrusted by the authorities with the duty of distributing the day's work, according to a list given him. Unfortunately the decision did not rest with him; he only obeyed orders, and transmitted them.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

We decided to escape with some fire-arms. We were to disarm our guard one day, when working outside the camp, and then to try and reach the frontier. We wanted one or two companions, money, a map and a compass for the realization of our plan. Preparations were begun at once. It was difficult to make plans and meet very often, as our talking in whispers was sure to excite suspicion. We had to be very careful.

Two alternatives were fixed on; the first was to run away when cutting twigs for brooms, on the mainland, about a mile away from the camp. Parties of ten or twelve men were sent there with five or six soldiers.

The other plan was to run away from a funeral. When one of the prisoners died, five or six convicts followed the body to Kem, accompanied by two or three soldiers; it was a distance of about ten miles.

But we wanted someone we could trust to help us and, ultimately, to join us. Malsagov had no one to recommend and was waiting for some of his fellow-mountaineers to be sent to Solovetski; but none came and we wasted some time waiting for them.

I was very careful about choosing my men. There was a man called Sazonov, who often worked with me. I sounded him, and found out that he had been twice over the frontier and was willing to begin over again. Having got to know him, I asked him to join us and took him into our councils.

A map and a compass had to be procured some-

THE SOLOVETSKI ISLANDS

how. Sazonov told me he knew a man who had a compass hidden away, in a cake of soap, probably with the idea of escape in view. I asked Sazonov to find out if his friend would be willing to join us.

A map was more difficult to find. Malsagov sometimes succeeded in studying a large map in the office. On the information gained, and on the strength of the office map, we concluded that we were about 225 miles from the Finnish frontier.

No roads were indicated on the map, so we knew nothing about the villages we were to pass on the way. The swamps that lay between us and the frontier were supposed to be impassable.

The money question was also a serious one; although, if we were well armed its absence would be felt less. Malsagov had some, and then one fine day went and spent it all on vodka! I remember being very angry about it. Not long before our actual escape, Sazonov sold one or two of his belongings and got a small sum.

Our party was formed; there were four of us. I knew Malsagov and Sazonov, but had only twice spoken to Malbrodsky. Sazonov and Malbrodsky did not know Malsagov. We were all in different companies, except myself and Sazonov. There were a lot of details which had to be carefully gone into and everything had to be prepared; but all was decided, in its main details, and we were only waiting for a favourable moment. I wanted to take advantage of a funeral to effect our escape, as that would enable us to have a horse. We were unlucky

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

in this respect; there were several funerals at a time; the men seemed to die in twos and threes and more prisoners were sent to attend the funerals.

An incident then occurred that might have cost us very dearly. Malsagov and I used to go in turns to the hospital to find out if a funeral was expected. One day Malsagov, who was a Mahometan, heard that a man from the Caucasus, who was, he thought, a co-religionist of his, lay dying. He went at once to his chief and asked to be allowed to attend the Mahometan funeral. The permission was given; we were all to accompany Malsagov and intended to escape on the way back. All our preparations were made, when Malsagov was sent for by the authorities, and told that the man who had just died was a Jew and would be buried by the Jews.

After this we decided to wait for no more funerals, but to run away from work, outside the camp, on the first possible occasion. It was early spring in these regions, although it was late in the month of May. There was no time to be lost; as soon as the White Sea was navigable, we were to be taken to the central camp on another island. The only difficulty, now, was to be sure of being sent to work together, with no others too near us. A party of ten or twelve was usually sent to collect the brooms. Malsagov succeeded in having the number brought down to five.

CHAPTER XXIII

FINAL ESCAPE (EXTRACTS FROM
DIARY)

OUR escape was definitely fixed for the 18th of May. We hurriedly finished our final preparations. Malbrodsky dug his compass out of the soap; Sazonov was busy selling all his property; I mended my old boots. Malsagov, as a true Mahometan, went through a whole process of washing. The latter had never seen our other two companions; I had to make them known to him, or at least show them to him. I went out with them at an appointed time and to a fixed place so that Malsagov might see them.

Our plan was definitely established: the guard would probably consist of two soldiers. We were to begin work as usual and, at a suitable moment, I was to offer a cigarette to one of the soldiers; if he accepted I was to take hold of him and get possession of his rifle; two of the others were to do the same with the other soldier. My putting up the collar of my coat would be a signal for action. It was agreed that Malsagov and myself were to disarm one soldier, while Malbrodsky and Sazonov took the other.

The other three wanted to kill the soldiers; but I would have no bloodshed. I wanted to avoid violence. Of course if my own or my companions' lives were in danger we should have to finish off the soldiers, but I would not do so unless absolutely

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

obliged. God had not helped me so far to make a murderer of myself. We decided to take the soldiers with us.

What were we to do next? We had done all we could, in the way of getting ready; we had a compass, but had not been able to procure a map. All in our power had been done; by God's grace, after making the sign of the cross, we would start Westward!

May 17th — Sazonov suddenly asked me to put off our departure. He had not been able to get any provisions. This was another point on which we disagreed. He wanted to take as much as we could carry. I was against it, as there was always the possibility of our being searched at the gates, especially if they had the least suspicion of us.

I was quite sure our escape ought not to be put off. There were fifty chances to a hundred that we would be caught and executed; we had made up our minds that the risk must be run; if we put it off, we might lose our determination of mind and many things might stop us. I felt it was now or never and insisted on starting next day. Sazonov, in the end, gave up arguing, and it was decided to proceed. I next went to ask Malsagov if he were sure that we would, all four, be sent out to work together. He answered that in all probability things would be in our favour. We wished each other good night and I went to bed; we all wanted a good night's rest before starting on our adventurous journey.

No sooner had I lain down, than one of the pris-

FINAL ESCAPE

oners came up to me and began telling me of his hopeless love for one of the female convicts. I did my best to get rid of him without hurting his feelings, but nothing seemed to be able to stop him. The sun had risen when I at last fell asleep. My first thought on waking next morning was: 'This is the day!' I firmly resolved to let nothing prevent us from accomplishing our project.

I got up, washed and drank some hot water. Call-over passed as usual. Our names (Sazonov's and mine) were read out together, in the distribution of the day's work. We went out and, coming up to the office, met the hopeless lover; he looked at me and said: 'What is the matter, Bezsonoff; why are your eyes so bright; you must be in love too?' — 'So I am, with liberty,' almost escaped from my lips; but I stopped in time.

Malsagov came up at that moment; by the way he was dressed, I saw that he was going to work outside the camp; all was well so far. He superintended the formation of the different work parties and at last said: 'Now for the brooms; it is very wet there, so it had better be some of those who have decent boots; well, you two can go and you too (pointing at us), and you as well,' said he, turning to a broad-faced individual who was completely unknown to me. That meant that he had been told to send five, instead of four men, to collect brooms.

We started, accompanied by two soldiers. One of these soldiers was a great strong man. I thought that very unlucky, as we had generally had under-

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

sized men to guard us. I decided that Sazonov could tackle the giant, as he had boasted of being ready to attack one of the soldiers single-handed.

As we came up to the gate, I felt my spirits drop; there stood a company commander who had always shown a particular aversion for Malsagov and never missed an occasion of tormenting him, if he could. I expected him to stop us, to prevent Malsagov from going out of the camp, and also, to search us. Suspicion would be aroused; we would all be shot! Luckily he was looking the other way, when we passed him.

We went through the gate. It was a lovely spring day; the sun shone brightly. We kept close together, chatted and smoked and pretended to take no notice of the soldiers, who walked one on each side of us. The bridge was crossed and we were on the mainland. We offered the soldiers some cigarettes, which they refused.

'Well, where shall we begin?' asked Malsagov.

'A little farther on; I know the place,' said I. We went on till we came to a clump of young trees. Before beginning work, I again asked the soldiers if they would like to smoke. 'You can sit down and rest and smoke as much as you like!' was their answer. They were in no hurry; it was easy work that we were going to do and could be done in half the time allotted for it. We sat down and pretended to talk. My mind was busy deciding when would be the most favourable moment for our attack. 'Well, it is time to begin,' said I, getting up and going in

FINAL ESCAPE

one direction with Malsagov, while Malbrodsky and Sazonov went in another; this had been agreed upon, so as to separate the soldiers. The giant unfortunately came with us. I looked up at him and wondered how on earth I was going to disarm him. I noticed that he kept looking at me; I moved away; he followed me. I did not like it at all; if he continued we would never be able to attack him. I saw that Malsagov was breaking off alder branches instead of birches and told him so. The soldier turned round to make the same remark. 'Now is the time,' said I to myself, and put up my collar. The soldier stood near me, but was looking another way. Sazonov and Malbrodsky had seen me give the signal for action; but Malsagov was not looking.

Three or four bounds and I had reached my soldier, seized him by the throat with my right hand and gripped it hard with my left. To my surprise, the soldier, with a stifled groan, fell to the ground, dropping his rifle at my feet. I kept him down by sitting on him. Malsagov had turned round and picked up the rifle. Sazonov and Malbrodsky were struggling with the other soldier. Malsagov rushed up to them and drove the bayonet into the man's arm. He let his rifle drop and fell down on his knees. We had mastered them!

The two soldiers, and our unknown companion, were all on their knees before us, begging us to spare their lives. They cried and sobbed and implored. One of the rifles was given to me; the bayonet was bent, it had touched the man's bone. We

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

were free; but there was no time to be lost; the railway was quite close to us and we had to get away as quickly as possible, as we might be seen. Malsagov and I walked one on each side of the party; the sobbing and wailing soldiers were in the middle. We started Westward, guided by the compass. So began our thirty-five days' march through forest and swamp!

It was a warm, sunny day. Our hearts were light; the trees, the sky, the sun, all seemed particularly beautiful and almost new to us. This was real freedom. God was with us, our consciences were clear; we were strong and well armed. All the dangers were yet to be confronted, but this was a never-to-be-forgotten day and I enjoyed it thoroughly. We took off our hats, embraced each other and breathed in the fresh air. We had only thirty cartridges, of which twenty-eight were to be fired at the enemy and two reserved for ourselves.

Our way lay over swamps; our feet sunk into the boggy ground; the rivers had overflowed. There was still some snow in the forest. The soldiers and our unwilling companion walked together; Sazonov and Malbrodsky immediately followed them. Malsagov and I brought up the rear, with the compass. Having walked about three miles and feeling very tired, we sat down to rest. The soldiers and our other companion were told to sit a little apart and forbidden to talk among themselves. We sat down together, drank some water and decided what was to be done next.

FINAL ESCAPE

There was not much danger for the present; no one would notice our absence till dinner-time, at noon. Of course they would then start in pursuit, with blood-hounds. This would be particularly disagreeable; it was comparatively easy to elude men in the forest, but almost impossible to avoid being discovered by a dog. I tried to walk in the water, whenever we crossed a stream, but that was not sufficient and our scent could be easily followed.

Our intention now, was to cross the Petrograd-Murmansk railway, about ten miles from the convict 'camp.' Then, having passed north of Kem, we would follow the river of the same name, that flowed almost due east, to its source.

We did not know how to get rid of the soldiers; if we let them go soon, they would return to the camp and tell the direction in which we had gone. My companions wanted to shoot them and have done with them; but I would not allow that, unless it were absolutely necessary. I had decided to kill them, only at the very last extremity, if there was a choice between killing them, or ourselves being killed. God had saved me so far, and I believed He would do so still, without it being necessary to turn murderer. It was at last decided that we should take them with us some way and pretend to be going north.

Our rest lasted some time; we compared our impressions of the attack and of the first moments of freedom; the tall soldier, on being asked why he had kept looking at me, said that he had suspected me

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

of intending to run away by myself: 'Only please do not shoot me!' he added, going down on his knees. The other soldier was told to approach and we dressed his wounded arm. It was a flesh wound and not at all serious. 'I do not mind the wound, only let me live,' he begged. These men could not believe that we were not going to kill them and, every now and then, begged us to spare them. It was difficult to persuade them that we had no intention of killing them, and I tried to explain the difference between the Bolshevik point of view and ours.

We invited 'number five' to join us; he turned out to be a Cossack, Vasska Pribloudni by name; when the struggle began he had not understood what it was all about and who were the aggressors, and had gone down on his knees and held up his arms, to be on the safe side. I asked him whether he preferred coming with us, going back to the camp, or going off by himself. He begged us to take him with us. This did not exactly suit us, as it was one more mouth to feed and, in spite of his being our fellow-captive, we knew nothing about him or whether he was to be trusted. We did not repulse him and the question remained undecided.

Having rested, we started again. It was hot in the sun; we took off all our superfluous clothing and made the soldiers carry it. Malbrodsky even changed his clothes for those of one of the soldiers, the taller one; I wanted to follow his example, but the other man's clothes did not fit me.

Walking was very difficult. Our boots were full

FINAL ESCAPE

of water. The ground was soft and boggy. We had to clamber over many fallen trees. We went boldly on; our newly gained liberty kept up our spirits; we did not notice the difficulties; it all seemed quite easy and delightful.

None of us had a watch. Judging by the sun, it was past noon. We went on and on and soon began to feel hungry. We stopped and rested once more, and then moved on again. Later on, we saw the railway again, and the town of Kem to the south-west.

It was time to have a nap now, as we had decided to walk all night. I had taken my Bible with me and, later on, when I got muddled as to days and dates, I started a diary in it, making a note of what happened every day. At first I only wrote down the most prominent events of the day; but afterwards it became a regular diary. The first entry is as follows:

May 18th.—Disarming of the soldiers and escape. Halt with the Red soldiers.

We were tired and very hungry. Sazonov had, in spite of my wishes to the contrary, brought some cold bacon and several lumps of sugar. These provisions were of the greatest use to us, for that day and the next. We now had a short meal. The soldiers and 'number five' lay down side by side. We took it in turns to sleep, while one remained to guard our camp and keep an eye on the soldiers. I could not, at first, make out where I was, when I awoke. I soon realized that I was free and in the forest, in

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

such complete liberty as I had never yet experienced. What was the future to bring? Life, love, liberty or . . . death? If it was to be death, I was not afraid of it. I thanked God for the joy I felt at that moment; it had been worth living for and would even be worth dying for!

The sun was setting; the 'white' Arctic night would not last long. Something had to be done with the soldiers. I had quite made up my mind to let them go safely away, although my three companions thought it was running an unnecessary risk. I thought that, by making an appeal to their better feelings, they would do their best to put off their return to Popov Island as long as possible. I took each of them apart and laid the case before him: 'You must understand,' said I, 'that it would be much more to our advantage to kill you; but I do not want to kill. In return for this I have only one service to ask of you: try and be as long on the way back as you possibly can, and when you are questioned about it, say that you lost your way, were exhausted and could not go on; you are sure to be believed; especially as you are wounded,' I added, to the one who had shown fight and resisted our attack. 'We are willing to let you go; but you must do this for us!'

They shed tears and promised faithfully to do as I asked them; but hardly believed I was really going to let them off, alive. They were not used to such 'sentimentality' and expected to be killed every moment. Pribloudni finally joined us. We started,

FINAL ESCAPE

and walked north this time, to make the soldiers think we were really going that way. When we had walked some way in the wrong direction, long enough to have taken the soldiers in, I let them go. I walked with them through the wood, until they were completely puzzled and had no idea where either we or they were going and then left them. They went on until the end imploring me not to kill them; even when they were disappearing into the forest, they lifted their hands in supplication. They must have experienced different treatment from that which they had from us. I am quite sure they kept their promise of reaching the camp only after some time had elapsed. They could not move quickly through the forest without a compass; they had only the sun to guide them.

We now began our march west. We had had nothing to eat all day; only a small piece of bacon and a lump of sugar each and were very hungry and tired. We felt it more, as the excitement gradually wore off.

I walked in front, carrying the compass in my outstretched hand and armed with one of the rifles. Malbrodsky followed; Malsagov with the other rifle and Sazonov were some way behind; Vasska came last of all. They were all even more exhausted than I was. I had hoped that Sazonov, who was experienced in such adventures, would be a great help to me. He had promised to disarm one of the soldiers all by himself; he knew the forest and the marshes in those parts; he seemed the strongest of

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

the party. But alas! He was the first to give way. Malsagov was different, he was brave to the length of foolhardiness, but always unwilling to give himself too much trouble and to bear hardships. Now, he was tired and hungry and insisted on the necessity of rest and food. Malbrodsky walked steadily on, complained of nothing, but was over anxious to go on and on, without stopping. Differences like these arose every now and then. They had given me dictatorial rights over the whole expedition and now refused to obey me; I was obliged to insist on absolute submission and ordered them all to keep together and move on. They grumbled, but obeyed me. Walking was really very difficult; we were now crossing some of the 'impassable' swamps. Our feet sunk deep into the ground; we had to jump from mound to mound; even they were soft and muddy, and we had to drag our feet out at every step. We stopped to rest, very often. It was broad daylight by now and we, at last, stopped for a long rest, though not before I had ascertained that neither threats nor persuasion could make the others go on. I chose a dry spot, an 'oasis' of rock in the swamp, and we stopped for our 'night's rest.' The entry in my diary for that day is:

May 19th. – Camping on the rocks.

We made a bonfire. One of the party had found an old tin on the railway line and we proceeded to boil some water in it and had some 'tea.' But we were hungry, having had no proper meal for over twenty-four hours. I stayed up on guard, while the

FINAL ESCAPE

others lay down round the bonfire and fell sound asleep. I appreciated my liberty to the full and felt very happy. I had a good wash in a pool near by, threw some more wood on to the fire and abandoned myself to my recollections and hopes for the future. I was determined to keep the resolutions I had made during my captivity; God would help me. I made up my mind that love of God and love of man would be the directing springs of my life and dwelt on the future love, happiness and freedom that I hoped lay before me. But my resolutions must be kept. I was happy and confident.

When we had all had a good sleep and were rested, it was decided that food must be found at any cost. The railway was not far off; there were sure to be habitations in the neighbourhood, where food could be procured. But there was always the danger of being captured. However, food had to be found and the risk must be run. We picked some last year's cranberries and bilberries, but they were not much in the way of food. There was not a building to be seen anywhere, when we came out on to the railway line. A little way further on, we heard a cow lowing. That was a most joyful sound. There was a slight discussion as to the best way of approaching the building, which we soon saw. Sazonov and Malbrodsky wanted to ascertain if all were safe, before going near it; Malsagov and I insisted on going straight to the point. We adopted the latter course. Malsagov followed me closely as we came up to a large house or hut. 'Keep close up,

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

we are going to search that place,' I said to him. We walked on very fast, so as to give the people no time to prepare for our approach, if they had already seen us. We went briskly into the building and I said in a loud peremptory voice: 'The Kem division of the Ogpu has ordered us to search this building. Please go into the back room!' There must have been at least twenty men sitting at the table; they were workmen engaged in repairing the railway line. Some of them mumbled something about showing an order for the search. 'This is my order!' said I, pointing my rifle at him. They all obeyed me instantly and left the room like a flock of sheep.

I told Malsagov to stand at the door and shoot anyone who attempted to move, and the other three, to take all the food they could find. Here Vasska came forward and produced a bag he had somewhere about him; the bag was soon full of bread, bacon, butter, flour and all the eatables he could find. I took up a hatchet, a kettle, mugs and spoons, and distributed them among our party. Sazonov took a pot of 'kasha' out of the oven and we ate it all up greedily, and also drank a good deal of milk. All this had lasted ten minutes. I then went into the room where the workmen were shut up and said: 'Look here, my friends, I do not care who you are, but you may be poor, so here are ten roubles for all we have taken. You will soon find out who we are. Now you are to stay there for two hours. Good-bye!'

None of them moved. I saw by their faces that some of them were Communists. They had been

FINAL ESCAPE

taken unawares, and all had been done so quickly that they had hardly recovered their senses before we were gone. After our good meal we shouldered our booty and went northward along the railway, turned into the forest and walked parallel to the lines, still keeping in sight of the windows of the house we had plundered. When we were quite out of sight we made a wide *détour*, turned to the east, then to the south, crossed a river, re-crossed the railway and at last went back to our original direction, south-west, towards the River Kem.

In spite of having something to carry now (Malsagov and I had the rifles, and the others were laden with the food, etc.) at first no one complained of fatigue, because of the good supper we had had. We felt more or less secure, as we were about ten miles from the railway. Malsagov and Sazonov, however, soon began begging me to stop for a rest and something to eat. They began again, every time they saw a bit of dry ground. 'It is perfectly dry here,' they said for the fifth or sixth time. It was on a little hillock, and a north wind was blowing. I objected on account of the wind; they insisted and said they were used to camping out and to guerilla warfare. This is why my entry for the day is:

May 20th. — Attack on railway line. 'Guerilla' camping.

Of course we were soon obliged to move on, as the wind was too cold and we could not sleep there. After having made some 'kasha' in the kettle and eaten and drunk sufficiently we went on. Walking

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

became more and more difficult. It was lucky for us that we were crossing these 'marshes' so early in the year. In summer they are really impassable. I wondered why our feet did not sink in altogether, but soon found out the reason by digging my bayonet into the ground. It went in quite easily up to a certain point, and would go no further. It was the ice that stopped it, and us, from being sucked in. The ground had thawed to a depth of about three feet and that was all. This was our salvation.

In spite of the ice there were places we could not pass, and we often had to turn back and go round another way, choosing another path. Many a mile did we walk unnecessarily and so wasted much of our strength. There was a sharp north wind; we were wet through, from having slipped and fallen into the bog many times over. We reached the forest at last; it was dry underfoot there and we lay down to rest, without waiting for daybreak.

May 21st.—Night spent in forest. Obliged to stop under cover, on account of snowstorm.

Having taken a short nap, we moved on, and soon coming out of the wood, again walked through a marsh. This time, walking on it was even worse than it had been the day before; the water was colder and the wind had strengthened. We did not succeed in getting warm, in spite of being on the move all the time. Malbrodsky and I kept far in advance of the others, who were completely exhausted.

Having discovered a sheltered nook, I decided

FINAL ESCAPE

to let them have a rest. We made a big bonfire, for although most of us were natives of the south of Russia, we had learnt to make a bonfire. Southerners can only keep up a small fire by lighting and burning little branches and twigs; a Northerner begins with small pieces of wood and, as soon as they are really burning, he throws big logs on to his bonfire, and then when these are alight, puts whole trunks of trees on, that give forth plenty of real heat. We wanted a good fire that day; for as the wind grew colder and colder, the trees rocked and swayed; the clouds looked threatening, a snow-storm was beginning.

We lay round our bonfire feeling cold and dejected. There was no chance of being properly sheltered whatever the weather. We had nothing to do but bear it. The swamp was covered with a thick coat of snow, there was snow all round us. The storm raged, the wind blew, the snow went on falling. . . .

Something had to be done to provide shelter, so very unwillingly my companions started to put up a hut; we were all very tired, and not at all inclined to exert ourselves. We put up some thick boughs, covered them with fir branches and got under cover of them; but it was not much good; it was not freezing, the heat of the bonfire soon melted the snow on our shed and we got wet through.

The storm lasted five days! We stayed there all that time. The wind blew without ceasing, the trees moaned, the snow went on falling. It was a dreadful time. The entries for those days are:

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

May 22nd.—Obliged to stop in hut, on account of snowstorm.

May 23rd.—The same as yesterday.

May 24th.—Snowstorm continues, left off towards evening.

May 25th.—Snow all round us, three feet deep.

May 26th.—Snow has begun to melt.

We sat there forlorn, cold and hungry; far away from the whole world. Our clothes were wet through. We felt utterly helpless and unable to do anything. We could only wait, and that was hardest of all. It was too cold to sleep the first night. As soon as we had dried our clothes at the bonfire they were wet again. We tried drying them, but only succeeded in getting them singed; they were as wet as ever in a few minutes. We had plenty to eat the first day or two but, on the third day, were obliged to ration out the food. It grew worse and worse. We were apathetic, and indifferent to everything. We hardly uttered a word, and thought that the inclination to sleep and the general depression were the first signs of scurvy. There was hardly any difference between day and night; always the same dim grey light, and the snow went on falling. It was here I got muddled about days; they were all exactly alike.

There was a change at last; it grew lighter and a little warmer, but still went on snowing. Then the wind turned to the south, the snow stopped falling and a thaw set in. We began to feel more cheerful. I went out and looked about, but thought it was too

FINAL ESCAPE

soon to start walking over the swamps, as they were still covered with snow and there was the danger of falling and being sucked into a pool. We could not wait long, however, for there was scarcely any food left and we were afraid of falling ill of scurvy. There was every reason to fear it; we were badly nourished, it was cold, and we had been almost motionless for five days. So we waited a little and then started.

May 26th (continued).—Snow thawing. At 2 p.m., reached River Kem. 7 p.m., came up to Poduzhumie village. 11 p.m., met two peasants who gave us some bread. All night, followed Kem. All cheerful. Red soldiers in Poduzhumie, looking for us, went away not having seen us.

There was a thin layer of snow over everything. In spite of the fatigue, we were glad to be able to walk, after our forced inaction on the preceding days. We moved quickly and soon came to a village on the banks of the River Kem. There were sheep grazing in the fields; I wanted to take one, but thought we had better not set the peasants against us. I went round the village to see how the land lay. Our footprints were clearly visible in the snow.

'Stop!' I cried. There were other footmarks; two men in nail-shod boots accompanied by two dogs had gone on before us. This was an unpleasant discovery. Leaving the others behind, I went on to reconnoitre, and soon saw that the footmarks pointed in the opposite direction, 'they' must have turned back; we had not met; all was well so far.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

We continued our march and soon came to the river, beyond the village. A wide expanse of water was before us; there were no signs of footsteps on the narrow little path along the bank of the river. The stillness was absolute. Night came on. We walked along the path. Suddenly a noise was heard that sounded like hammering. We listened and soon heard voices, and then saw two peasants putting up a fence. Would it be prudent to go up and speak to them? I did not like showing signs of our existence; but we wanted some food badly, and also to find out if there was any danger ahead; so Malsagov and I went up to them and wished them 'good evening.' They answered, but did not seem anxious to know who we might be or what we wanted; they asked no questions and seemed to know all about us. I began: 'I suppose you know who we are? We are runaways, not Bolsheviks; won't you help us?'

There was no answer; so I went on: 'We will not tell on you, and you must say nothing about having seen us.' - 'We are not spies,' they answered, 'what is it you want us to do?' I told them that we wanted to know whether we were pursued, and what we might expect to find if we continued in the same direction, and asked where we could get some bread.

They told us that the village we had just passed was called Poduzhumie. There had been twenty-five soldiers there, that day, with police-dogs. They had left; but it was not known in which direction they had gone. The peasants had been threatened with severe punishment if they gave us anything

FINAL ESCAPE

to eat. They had also been promised a large quantity of flour if they helped to discover our whereabouts. There were two farms, twenty-five miles up the river; we could find all the food we wanted there.

'We will give you all we have here, you must be very hungry?' said one of the old men. They had come there by boat, and had a quantity of bread, which they gave us. We thanked them and went on our way, eating the bread as we went along. It would keep us going for some time. We followed the river along a narrow path. Our march was impeded by a number of little running streams, which we had to cross; logs of wood were thrown over most of them, but there was a ravine to go down every time and to climb up on the other side.

In spite of the cold, hunger and fatigue, I enjoyed the lovely surroundings; the 'white' nights are very beautiful in the forest. After sunrise, the forest echoed and re-echoed with the songs of birds. The colouring was magnificent. We came upon a bear's trail. I enjoyed and appreciated my liberty to the full. A man should be really happy and contented, if he has all the necessities of life; that is food, a roof over his head, and freedom to enjoy them.

We went straight on, without resting, until noon. There was no more bread. People had seen us, and knew in which direction we had gone; so we had to be even more careful than usual. We saw the farmhouse from a distance, and another one about a mile further on. I thought that if anyone was lying in wait for us it would probably be in the house nearer

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

the river, and so decided to go on to the more distant one. We were very tired, and not at all inclined to walk further than was absolutely necessary. I asked no one's advice, and moved on. We came up to the second farm-house; we approached it from an eminence and were able to ascertain that the yard was empty and that there were no signs of life anywhere near. We looked in at the windows, before going in. Malsagov followed me; he could hardly move from exhaustion. I saw several people sitting round a table; most of them were peasants, but there were several bald heads to be seen. I thought that suspicious; but it was too late now; I went round to the door. Malsagov had not noticed a peasant who was crouching on the ground in the yard. I opened the door. There was a soldier just inside; he pointed his rifle at me, but instead of firing, called out: 'Hands up!'

At that moment, the shot went off; but I had had time to get out of its way. The man's stupidity had saved my life. Instead of shooting at once, he had shouted! The whole house seemed to be full of rifles. I fired too, but only broke off a bit of plaster. I had only fifteen cartridges and had to be careful not to waste any.

'You had better surrender! We are ready to fight to the death!' I called out. I was resolving, in my own mind, what had best be done. How many were they? Would reinforcements come from the other farm? 'If we are to fight it out, we had better do so outside,' I thought, and called out to Malsagov:

FINAL ESCAPE

'Come up the hill!' We ran up the hill. We could see all around us and were near enough to the house for all those who came out to be within range of our rifles. All was quiet, no one attempted to leave the house. We waited ten minutes and then saw a boat on the river, with four soldiers in it; they must have jumped out of the window and lowered a boat. They had nearly crossed the river when we caught sight of them, as the house shut out the space between it and the river from our view. I fired one shot in their direction, to frighten them and encourage their flight; they rowed very fast after that, got out of the boat and rushed into the wood. It would have been foolish to pursue them; we had no idea how many more of them there might be somewhere in hiding. So we also did our best to get away as quickly as possible.

The River Shomba, a tributary of the Kem, had now to be crossed. I specially dreaded that crossing. The Bolsheviks might be waiting for us there, as that was the direction that we should most likely take. I wanted to have the crossing over as soon as possible; that same night if we could manage it. We had about fifteen miles to walk before reaching it.

We followed the river. We had nothing whatever to eat, but we had just had sufficient proof of God's protection, and my faith did not waver. I was right; God did help us, and very soon. We found a fisherman's hut; the man gave us, or rather, did not object to our taking, some fish, bread, meat and flour. He even accompanied us a little way and his

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

parting words were: 'You must go on like hunted animals; avoid the paths, keep to the forest!'

My diary for that day:

May 27th.—Walked all day and all night without resting. Towards evening came to a farm and discovered soldiers waiting for us in ambush. After a few shots soldiers escaped in boat. We followed the Kem and took some provisions in fisherman's hut. Not much left. Will have to starve. Terrible fatigue. At 2 a.m., left the river, stopped to rest at 7 a.m.

May 28th.—Did not move till evening. Not much food. Our feet terribly swollen. Started again at 10 p.m.

Malsagov's feet were covered with sores. His toes had been frozen during the snowstorm; they were now blue and he could not move them. I told him they were blue because of the cold, although I knew they had been frost-bitten; but as there was nothing to be done for him, I said they would be all right again after walking. The only thing was, for us all to reach the frontier as soon as possible. We were not able to get to the Shomba that night; we were too exhausted. We decided to go a little out of our way and cross it nearer its source, where the Bolsheviks would be less likely to expect us. The thought of that crossing tormented me; Sazonov said we could build a raft; but I knew that was more easily said than done. We moved on in the direction we had decided upon, but were not able to go very far. Hunger, and the two sleepless nights, told on

FINAL ESCAPE

us. We soon lay down to rest, and slept all day. Our feet were in an awful state. After this long rest we could hardly manage to put our boots on again; our feet were so swollen. I had nearly burnt Malsagov's boots during the snowstorm in futile attempts to dry them. I now arranged his rubber goloshes for him, making them keep on with straps; I was obliged to carry my own boots as there was no way of putting them on, I wore a pair of slippers that Sazonov had brought from the camp.

May 29th.—Walked through 'impassable' swamps all night. Rested all day. Bilberries, geese and hare. Malbrodsky too tired to go on, were obliged to stop again. 'Salt fish.'

Ever since we had started, I had tried to get the others to move on as quickly as possible and to rest as seldom as they could. I was not always successful. Malsagov was always asking to stop 'for a moment'; he used to begin in a soft conciliatory tone of voice, and then insist rudely. I knew that when once we stopped it would be very difficult to get them to start, so I usually went on until I saw they were really too tired to go on.

That day we walked over a marsh that was covered with a red carpet of bilberries which had stayed beneath the snow all winter and were now very good to eat, indeed, seemed specially so, to us hungry beggars. We also saw some game, wild geese and hares. I longed to shoot them, but could not risk a shot, as I was not absolutely sure of bringing the game down; so as we saw none quite near enough,

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

I decided to abstain. We stopped for a short rest among the bilberries, and then started, but did not get very far. Malbrodsky had been the best walker of our party. He was not so easily tired as the others; excitement had probably kept him up; but now his nerves or his will seemed to have given way and I saw him walking in curves and zig-zags before me, and swaying from side to side. I asked him what was the matter; he said he would be all right in a minute or two. I saw there was something wrong, that he might drop down any minute, and then not be able to get up again. I helped him to the nearest 'oasis,' or island, in the marsh and we all stopped to rest. He kept up until we were there and then fell down. There was scarcely any food left, so we divided it all between us; there was a little salt fish, some bread and a little 'manna' (semolina).

We boiled the fish and each took our share. There was no salt. There is a saying that salt is an object for quarrelling. It proved true this time. I gave Sazonov his share of the 'soup' (the water the fish had been boiled in). He asked for some salt. I said I had none to give. He lost his temper and knocked his mug of 'soup' over. I did not give him any more. I remember this episode well, which explains the words 'salt fish' in my diary. All these little events seem insignificant enough; but when it is almost a question of life or death they gain in importance.

May 30th.—Started again at 4 p.m. Safely crossed Shomba at 11 p.m. Great relief and joy. Went on all night.

FINAL ESCAPE

We crossed the Shomba quite easily. We had usually tried to avoid paths, but we came to a place where there were so many that there was no getting away from them; they led in different directions. There were no signs of recent footmarks, so we went boldly on and came to a small stream with a light bridge across it. This was the Shomba that had seemed such a nuisance to us. We crossed the bridge and could hardly believe that the Shomba was really behind us.

May 31st.—Unexpectedly came on a fisherman's hut. Owners absent. Took some bread, left three roubles. Great help. Going on.

Up there in the north, villages are situated very far apart. A distance of twenty or thirty miles is a short one, between two villages. I do not know whether we were lucky or whether God helped us; but, whenever things were very bad, unexpected help came.

May 31st (continued).—Lost our way among lakes. Built raft, crossed over. Moving on without stopping. Rain. Great fatigue. Terrible night, unable to keep up bonfire, not a moment of sleep. Rest more exhausting than march.

These were very bad days. Just as we had again indicated our presence by taking some food in a fisherman's hut, we were obliged to stop; there were lakes all round us and no way out. The country was very beautiful; wild swans were swimming on the blue lakes. Were we to turn back? We had no map and did not know what to do. We decided to build

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

a raft and cross one of the lakes. But this would demand a good deal of exertion, and there was not much energy left among us. The wood had to be cut, brought to the water's edge, and a raft constructed. We were very sleepy, but the work had to be done, and was done, but with great difficulty. When the raft was ready, we got on to it and pushed off; but the timber was damp and it soon went to the bottom; luckily the lake was shallow and we waded to the opposite bank. I thought of the danger we might have run in crossing the Shomba lower down the river; my apprehensions had not been without ground.

I took great care of my rifle, matches and Bible; I put these latter under my cap, where they kept perfectly dry. We were wet through, up to our shoulders. We wrung out our clothes and went on, glad to have got safely to the other bank. But there was no rest in store for us.

It soon started raining, rained rather fast, and then rained all night. We stopped to rest and tried to light a bonfire; but the rain put it out as soon as it was alight. All I could do was to keep the box of matches dry; I hid it and the compass away in my clothes and bent over them all night, protecting them with my body. This sleepless night, after the fatigue of the previous days, was very hard to bear. There was no way of getting warm and dropping off to sleep; the rain fell ceaselessly, and we were, if possible, even more tired than we had been before stopping to rest. We started again, as soon as it

FINAL ESCAPE

grew light. It was still raining. I think that must have been the hardest day of all. I could hardly walk; I felt ready to drop down at any moment.

We suddenly came out on to a well-trodden path, that led a little out of our way, to the north-west. I was sure a path like that must be a sign of there being some human beings near; we could perhaps rest under a roof, have our clothes dried, a good meal. The anticipation of all these things helped us to move on; the hope of possible food and rest was very tempting. We followed the path, which brought us to another lake; there was a village on the opposite bank. Malbrodsky looked dreadful; he was blue, and trembled all over. We looked at the village across the water, and then lay down to rest before attempting anything else. We were too tired to take the necessary precautions before entering the village.

June 1st.—Go on leading the others, but can hardly move. Rain left off in the morning. Rested all day. A hut.

June 2nd.—Rested all day and all night. Rain every now and then.

Things did not seem to improve; we were cold, wet and hungry. The neighbouring village was an ever present temptation, with the food and shelter it could afford us. We risked being caught by our pursuers if we went up to it; by not doing so we might lose all the little strength we had, for want of nourishment. We decided to see what we could find there.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

June 4th. — Asked the villagers for some food. A man promised to bring us some and deceived us. There had been soldiers in the village. Very little food left. Moving on to the West. What will God send us next? Condition desperate. Walking very difficult, mostly marshes. Stopped for half an hour. Ate a mug of 'manna' each. Must trust to Providence. Only comfort is, every hour brings us nearer to frontier.

Early that morning we came up to the water's edge. The village was just across the water. We shouted; there was no answer. We shouted again and saw a man lower a boat and row in our direction. We told him we were land-surveyors and had lost our way; could they give us some food. The man smiled and answered, in broken Russian, that there was no bread in the village; he then turned his boat round and rowed back. I jumped into the water, brought the boat back and said: 'Tell us at once, what is the matter!' He began rather unwillingly, but ended by telling all we wanted to know. There were soldiers in the village; they were away just then. The villagers were terrorized; they had been ordered to report if anyone asked for food and in no case to give any to strangers. A reward had been promised for the discovery of some escaped convicts. We begged the man to bring us some food in his boat and promised to pay him for whatever he brought. He promised, and rowed back in a hurry.

As soon as he landed, the whole village seemed to

FINAL ESCAPE

gather round him. We waited some time, but no one came to us and no food was brought. We went away as wet and as cold and as hungry as ever, to continue our way over the 'impassable' swamps, with no hope but in God's help. We went on to the West, as usual. All the food we had, was a little flour that we made into a kind of cake, or boiled and drank, with the hot water.

The limit of our endurance seemed to have been reached; Malsagov said he could not go on any longer. I tried persuasion, and threats; tried to frighten him, by saying we would all go on and leave him behind; but it was all of no avail. We were obliged to stop again.

June 5th.—Stopped at about 5 a.m. Malsagov unable to go on. All rather hopeless. Started at 9 a.m. Water in swamp cold as ice. North wind.

We baked the remaining flour into cakes and divided them. We also tried to calculate how far we could be from the frontier and decided to walk about twenty miles a day, if we could manage it.

Starting was always very difficult; just as we had got warm and dry, we were obliged to go on again in the cold and damp, with our feet in the water. It was generally easier after a time.

Forest, swamp, forest again; I do not remember much of that day. All our cakes were eaten. It began to rain. We felt that, after a few more efforts, the limit would be reached, and there would be nothing but death before us, death from exhaustion and starvation. I went on, compass in hand, always

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

to the West, choosing the easiest way. Malsagov, Sazonov, Malbrodsky and Vasska, in a state of complete dejection and apathy, followed. It was raining and very cold. Our legs refused to move, the wet branches beat upon our faces and tore our clothes; we could hardly lift our feet out of the mud, had barely strength enough to step over a fallen tree.

When there was a path to walk on, we moved easily enough, especially if there was a clearing in the wood. We came to a path, when we were growing quite desperate. We hoped it would bring us to some house or village; but instead of that it led up to a river that had to be crossed. I tried to cross it; but it was too deep and there seemed to be no way of fording it. I was past caring for anything, and made up my mind to cross that river, at any cost. When I was in mid-stream, with water up to my neck, I discovered some remains of an old bridge; they helped me to get over. When I was safely on the other side of the river, I looked around and saw a hut. 'If only we could find some bread now!' I thought. There was a house with four walls and a roof at any rate, where we could rest; that was something. I called out to my companions, and signed to them to follow me.

Before stopping to rest, I usually made an inspection, to see if there were any signs of danger about. I did so now and went some way round. I saw that the others were already installed in the hut; smoke was proceeding from it. If only there

FINAL ESCAPE

were something to eat, what a good rest we could have! I went on and saw, a little out of my way, a kind of shed shaped like a mushroom. I wondered what it was; perhaps some kind of chapel or shelter for the haymakers. I was terribly tired and sleepy, and did not feel at all inclined to go out of my way, but then decided to go and see why the 'mushroom' was there. There was water all round it. I waded in, and looked into the shed. There were several rows of large round stones inside. I picked one up, it was too light to be a stone; I broke off a bit and tasted it; it was a loaf of dried bread. The shed was full of loaves.

Still holding the precious loaf, I went down on my knees in the water and thanked God. I had been right in trusting to Providence! There were two rows of loaves, two bags of millet and a box of salt. I took five loaves and went to join my companions in the hut. Malsagov told me afterwards that he thought he was losing his senses when he saw me carrying the loaves and munching a great big bit of bread; he thought it was his fancy. He flew up to me and gave me a hug.

What a feast we had! Two hours later I was lying down in the well-heated room, smoking a cigarette, having had a good meal; my clothes were drying before the fire, I felt perfectly happy. The sun was shining through the half-opened door, I was free, I had food and shelter. I was happy.

The most delicate and luxurious meal will never be appreciated as much as the tired and hungry man

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

enjoys a bit of black bread and a good rest with a roof over his head. Also no impressions can be so vivid and delightful as those provided by nature. No liberty is enjoyed so much as the pleasure a man experiences when he has a clear conscience and no desire but to do God's bidding. I thank Him for having allowed me to understand and realize it to the full.

June 5th (continued). – An instance of God's help. Path in the wood. 'Impassable' river. Walked seven miles instead of twenty-five as decided. At 9 a.m. had only one cake left. Situation desperate. God gave us all we wanted. Waded through river. Haymakers' hut. 'Mushroom' with bread, salt, millet. Knelt and thanked God. It is morning now. All are asleep. Thank God again, He has saved us from committing violence. He will help us in future, of that I am certain.

June 6th. – Real moral as well as physical rest in hut. Happiness. Food and shelter.

June 7th. – Got up, lay in the sun. It was all a miracle.

June 8th. – Lovely warm weather. Water fast going down. Eat every two hours and thank God every time. It is night. Bonfire. Am keeping it up and guarding our camp. Good position, impossible to be taken unawares. Have just calculated that we must have walked about 215 miles, over 'impas-sable' swamps.

June 9th. – Slept all day. Got up with disagreeable feeling of uncertainty for the future, and absence

FINAL ESCAPE

of good understanding among us. Was up all night. Morally and physically quite fit.

We enjoyed the time spent in that hut. The weather was perfect. The 'white' nights were beautiful. The north lives in the spring. That season is very attractive, especially after the long and severe winter. Nature is in a hurry to take advantage of the short time given her, and finds no time to sleep, even at night. The sun sets, all is silent and at rest, and, in a very short time, life begins over again. The birds and animals are sorry to miss even a few hours of spring, and day begins almost immediately, the melancholy of night is over, all is clear and beautiful and cheerful; the air is pure, the sun shines brightly and softly.

I was up all that night. I sat by the bonfire and made myself some 'kasha' of millet; I found great pleasure in feeling that God had not abandoned me; I enjoyed the idea of being free and near to nature and all creation; I often thanked God for having kept me from murder, when I had been on the point of attacking the villages, in moments of desperation. He had saved me from committing a crime and had given me all that was needful. I thanked Him most sincerely. It would have been quite easy to have killed several of those soldiers in the farm-house, but I had purposely kept myself from firing until it was absolutely necessary to do so, and even then I had shot in the direction of the stove and had only brought down some plaster. A year ago I would have called this romantic nonsense, but now was

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

sure it had been right not to kill a man uselessly. Was it easier to fire, or to abstain from firing, when the man was in easy range of my rifle? Was it easier to go straight on and think nothing of others, or to conform one's wishes and impulses to God's law? Ought I to harden, or soften, my heart? Ought I to have no pity, no forgiveness? I was sure that violence of any kind was wrong. I was not strong enough morally to be always ready to forgive, give up and give way to others; my nature would have its way, but I could at any rate try to keep my resolutions and follow Christ's teaching.

It was warm. The water had gone down considerably. It was time to start again. Our rest had lasted long enough, and there was not much food left.

I must try and explain what the origin of the hoard under the 'mushroom' was: as far as I can say it must have been put there in readiness for the haymakers, when they came there in summer from some distant village; the marshes were really impassable in summer for any kind of vehicle; there were perhaps narrow little tracks where a man could walk, but it was difficult to get along with a load, so their provisions were brought in winter on reindeer and left there, in readiness for the men, when they came. I think that is the right explanation, but cannot vouch for it.

We knew nothing of what lay before us. As I said in my diary, I think we must have walked about 215 miles then. Unfortunately we disagreed about

FINAL ESCAPE

what was to be done next. Malsagov and I wanted to keep nearer to the villages, so as to be able to ask the way, and find out whether we were still pursued. The other two thought this too risky, and wanted to keep, as far as possible, away from all villages.

We had to move on; our provisions were coming to an end; they would last two or three days longer.

June 10th. — Slept all day. Have just got up, impossible to tell the time. Started towards evening. All unwilling to go on. Depression.

June 11th. — Stopped to rest near a lake. Meal soup. Bad day. Started again in the evening.

June 12th. — Walked all night. Stopped for 'short rest,' drank some hot water and went on again. Stopped to rest at 6 a.m. 'Hut N. 2.' Started towards evening. If we could only reach the frontier! I think there must be less than twenty miles now. I have only two bits of dry bread left, Malbrodsky has none.

Our long rest had done us good, but at the same time we were less energetic and more sensitive to fatigue after it; it had weakened our wills and power of endurance. Our chief diet was the millet boiled in water. We called it '*mealsoup*'.

We kept nearer to the villages now, passed through several meadows and saw a number of haystacks. When we came upon a hut just like the one in which we had rested, we hoped to find another 'mushroom' near it; but there was nothing like it anywhere near.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

June 13th.—Had some hot water early, in a shed near a lake. A path. A lake. Rain. Rested in broken-down hut. General irritability of whole company. No food left. God help us! Slept towards evening. Walked all night. Rain. Dew. Cold. A path.

June 14th.—A lake. Red soldiers again.

We just escaped being caught again. We had been walking along a path all night. It was cold and we were wet through. Some good, nourishing food was badly wanted. The trees were wet and the branches kept beating down upon our clothes; there was no sun to dry them. We shivered.

There were some fresh footprints on the ground, and we went on very carefully, looking to right and left. The path brought us to a lake, at the mouth of a river. Some men were heard talking. I hoped they were peasants, and that they would let us rest in their house and give us something to eat. Malbrodsky and I went on in the direction of the voices, trying to see before we were seen. We caught sight of a boat; there were two soldiers near it; I recognized the uniform of the regiment on guard on Popov Island. Luckily they did not see us, as we were behind some bushes. I wanted to fire; if I killed them, we would all be armed, and we were besides badly in need of some more cartridges. Then a voice within me seemed to say that, after all my resolutions, I ought to be ashamed of killing two men just for the sake of two rifles and a few cartridges.

FINAL ESCAPE

The temptation to fire left me; but I enjoyed feeling my power over those men, I had been hunted so long; I liked being hunter for a change. They got into the boat and rowed upstream, probably in search of us. It was the river that we were to cross.

Those poor, foolish men, so like all the rest of my countrymen, ready to follow the Bolsheviks like a flock of sheep. Their soul is not entirely lost, they are on the wrong road; they have been led away from the right one, tempted, deceived! I have a fellow-feeling and a very tender spot in my heart for them, and am sure that the day will come when they will turn back to the right path. They will turn to the East again, in the path of forgiveness, mercy, the path that leads to God. The time is sure to come. The East and Russia will lead the World to the Kingdom of the Spirit, will show Europe the right way; away from the evils of civilization, violence and Satan's kingdom.

Where were we after all, was this not the frontier? A little way further on there was a clearing in the forest, and some telephone or telegraph wires; we had seen none before, and began to hope it really was the frontier.

We walked on another seven or eight miles, there was nothing to be seen. We rested a little, but dared not light a bonfire. Food had to be procured, so we soon started again. It was late in the day, but quite light yet. A dog was heard barking. There was a farm-house in the distance. We decided to wait till

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

morning before approaching; there would be less risk then. After some hours' sleep, we lit a bonfire and boiled some water. We started at daybreak, and watched the farm from a distance.

It was Sunday morning. A woman came out of the house, followed by some children; then another woman. They washed at a pump; a man also came out. There were no soldiers to be seen; and the man went away. We did not want them to see us all together; so Malbrodsky went alone in search of food. From the position we occupied, anyone coming out of the house, to attack Malbrodsky, could be shot instantly; we could easily come to help in case of danger. He soon returned, however; for in his opinion the inhabitants of that house were Communists and he thought it more prudent to go away. But that I was determined not to do. We ran down the hill, and up to the door. We saw at once there were no icons on the wall, and Communist newspapers were lying about.

We took all the bread, butter, fish and salt we could find, got into a boat and rowed across the lake. When we had reached the western bank, we got out of the boat, left it behind, shouldered our booty and disappeared into the thick forest, eating some delicious fish pies on the way. We wanted to stop and have a proper meal, but it was too dangerous, for there was sure to be a pursuit. When we got to a low hill, from which we could see all around, we stopped, had a good rest, ate to our hearts' content, and went on.

FINAL ESCAPE

I had never felt so tired before. As leader, I was obliged to look at the compass most of the time and to choose the way; that was more exhausting than just to go on and follow another's lead. I handed the compass to Malbrodsky and trudged along behind all the others. I was, however, irritated by the direction he took; I saw by the sun that he was wrong, and told him so. Neither had he any idea of choosing the easiest way; he went up and down hill and so wasted our strength quite needlessly. We came to a river; the current was so strong that we tried in vain to cross it and then gave it up. I took the compass and we went back the way we had come. It was growing dark; the hills had wasted a great deal of our strength; it was time to stop and rest. We came to the path we had been following earlier in the day; we saw quite recent footmarks on it. A little further on there was a cigarette end; as we had none of our own, we used the tobacco that was left in it. Still further on there was a piece of paper lying on the ground, on which was written something like: 'Dear Comrade So-and-so, take the clothes I left with comrade such-a-one!' It had clearly been written by a Bolshevik, and it was also quite clear that we were being followed.

The situation was serious. The first thing was to ascertain the direction and number of the footsteps and then, on account of our being so tired, turn in the opposite direction to that in which we were going, and stop to rest, as we really could not go on.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

I cocked my rifle and went along, looking in all directions, and ready to fire at any moment. We tried to walk as noiselessly as possible. I remember how roughly I spoke to Malsagov, when I saw he was not following me as I wished, and not holding his rifle in readiness. He immediately obeyed me. We walked by the side of the path, so as not to show our footprints; those of the soldiers were clearly visible; there must have been ten of them in boots shod with nails and one man in ordinary ones; a peasant guide, probably.

The forest was perfectly still. There was a mound, on which were blocks of granite, before us, surrounded by thick bushes; we went up it. Suddenly there was a flash, then another; a noise of firing; the whole forest seemed to be alive! The firing continued; we heard the shots, but saw nothing. They seemed to be firing in another direction, or just missing us. All Malsagov's mountaineer blood was up: 'Take them! fire!' he whispered in my ear. I caught hold of his arm and pushed him down the side of the mound. Vasska ran away. Sazonov tried to get down the rock and turned over like a wounded hare: 'He is killed,' thought I. Malbrodsky was perfectly calm, and stood still.

The firing continued. I saw none of the enemy; they must have been behind some trees or bushes. I think there were about ten men shooting. It was clear that they were afraid of us and would not venture out of their hiding-place. It would have been foolish to stay where we were. I thought the

FINAL ESCAPE

only thing was to get away as quickly as possible. But where were we to go? which direction would be the right one? Having climbed down the rock I went in our usual direction, to the West, towards the river we had not been able to cross. Sazonov was there all right; so was Vasska, with the bag of bread, which he had dropped and then gone back to pick up. We were not pursued, and came safely to the river.

We tried crossing that river again; but the current was so strong that it knocked us down. There was a thin layer of ice on the pools; it was freezing. I cannot swim and was afraid of risking myself in the water. We all tried by turns. Malbrodsky stood in the middle of the stream and could not move any further; he was quite blue and looked frozen; he trembled so much, we thought he would fall down and be swept away by the current, to be beaten to death against the rocks; so we dragged him out of the water.

At last Sazonov succeeded in getting over to the other side. He had taken a long pole and, with its help, had crossed with the water up to his neck, where the current was less strong. Malsagov then followed him.

Our situation was now worse than ever; we were divided and could expect an attack at any moment. Sazonov came to our rescue. He came over with his pole, and helped Malbrodsky and myself to cross; Vasska followed us.

We were, of course, wet through; my Bible,

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

compass and matches were safe and dry, under my cap. All the bread was soaking and fell to pieces. Our clothes were heavy; I shivered violently. We were incapable of walking far, and having gone a little way into the forest, stopped to rest.

June 14th (continued).—Line of patrol. Circuit. Camping without bonfire. Still no signs of frontier. In my opinion crossed it at noon. Walked all night. Cold. Lit a bonfire and rested. No food.

June 15th.—Started early. Found provisions. Danger. Rested on a hill. River. Return to the path. Ambush. Under fire. Saved by a miracle. Retreated hurriedly to river. Terrible crossing.

When we were in Finland, we learnt that this river was considered ‘impassable.’ But where there is a will, there is a way!

June 16th.—Rest after crossing. Dried our clothes all day and all night. Divided remaining food. Quarrel. Peace again.

June 17th.—Rested all day. Started towards evening, and walked all night. Where are we?

We had a quarrel at this resting-place: Sazonov and Malbrodsky accused me of not being careful enough, and of running into danger. I was sick of it all, and said they might take the compass and go on as they pleased. Malsagov, Vasska and myself would go straight on by ourselves, guided by the sun, or, if there was no sun, simply trusting to God. I knew the frontier would not come to us, we must make a last effort and get over it.

I insisted on complete obedience, as they had

FINAL ESCAPE

promised; otherwise I refused to stay with them. They talked the matter over, and finally decided to give in, and once more promised submission. Malbrodsky had several times eaten all his bread before the others, and I had always shared what I had with him. I now insisted on having the control of all the food; I was to say when it could be eaten. He protested, but ended by submitting to this, too.

Now it was Vasska who refused to go on: 'I can't go on, I am too tired,' he complained. 'You are to go on at once!' I ordered. 'I can't,' he answered.

It was impossible to stay where we were; I was obliged to force him to make an effort, and boxed his ears so hard that he fell down: 'Will you go on now?' — 'I can't,' said he, getting up. I struck him again; he got up, and followed us obediently.

June 18th. — Shot a reindeer. Rested, and ate it all up.

We had not enough shot to be wasted on game; besides we had not seen any very near; but this time there was a fine reindeer; we were dreadfully hungry, I fired and he fell! Malsagov, especially, was delighted; he prepared the meat, and we all roasted it at a bonfire. It was all eaten before we started again, every bit of it. There was neither salt nor bread to eat it with, but we were famished and had not had any meat for a long time.

I had become extraordinarily sensitive to any sound and at once caught sight of the slightest sign of man being near, or of men having passed;

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

any bit of paper, or tobacco, or the faintest mark of footsteps, at once attracted my attention. Having eaten part of the reindeer we hung up the remains on a bough and lay down to sleep. We had been so tired, lately, that we all lay down without leaving anyone on guard. We followed the rule of the Caucasian Native Division in this; their rule is: 'If anyone is afraid, he can stay awake.' Suddenly there was a noise, a crash, and something fell to the ground. Malsagov and myself were up in a moment; what could be the matter now? It was the remains of the reindeer, which had broken the bough and fallen to the ground!

We were all ill that night, having indulged too much in reindeer. The only wonder is that none of us had been ill before! The water we drank came from the marshes, which were full of tadpoles and insects; and at night we had got wet through, and had stayed for hours under the falling snow or rain! We had been none the worse for that as soon as we were dry again. There was no getting out of it. God had protected and shielded us from many dangers.

June 19th. — Started early. Stopped to rest at noon and slept all the rest of the day.

We had not much strength left and were obliged to rest very often; we were fast coming to the end of our powers of endurance. Where was that frontier?

June 20th. — Started soon after sunrise. At 7 a.m., crossed a clearing in the forest. Stopped to rest.

FINAL ESCAPE

An attack! Do not know where we are. Stopped to rest a second time, near some cows.

We expected to reach the frontier at any moment; every clearing in the forest, every stream, we hoped was the border. We were very hungry again. There was a farm-house; and another in the distance. We decided to see what was to be had there. We examined the neighbourhood from a hill and then Malbrodsky went towards the farm. He soon waved his handkerchief to us, as a sign that we might approach. We surrounded the house and went in.

There was a man mending a pair of boots. I spoke to him in Russian. He stared at me and went on with his work.

'Finland?' said I. No answer.

'Russland? Finland?' I went on. No answer again.

'Helsingfors? Petrograd?' I continued. He stared and did not say a word.

His not understanding Russian was not a sign that we were in Finland, as that part of Russia is inhabited by a Finnish race, who do not speak Russian. We had not been understood at the last farm either. Was it Russia or was it Finland? there was no way of making out. The easiest way to find out for certain, would be to see what money they had; but as I could not explain, I might be taken for a robber, and an alarm might be raised. At that moment, a girl ran past the window in the direction of the neighbouring farm. She had probably gone to let our pursuers know we were there!

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

We had had enough adventures and run enough risks! It was no good lingering on; some food must be procured and we would make ourselves scarce, before it was too late! I called Vasska and told him to take what bread he could find; he took some fish too and stowed it all away in his bag, as well as some salt. I saw a tiny bit of soap, and could not resist taking that too. Sazonov still had a little money, and now came in to pay for what we had taken. To our surprise the woman took the silver coins and left the Soviet rouble!

That was certainly a sign that we were in Finland; but it was not sufficient proof, and we hurriedly retired.

The road to the west lay between two lakes. We did not go far now, and stopped to eat the food we had just obtained. For the first time since starting, I had a good wash in a pool, with my bit of soap. We slept all night after this, and on waking next morning discovered some cows; this showed that there were people not far off.

June 21st. — Started early. Walked all day. Rested at night. 'Three paths.'

I had begun to give way now. Up till then, I had always insisted on going on, and had only agreed to stop and rest when I saw that the others really could not walk any longer. Now the reaction had begun, the uncertainty was telling on my nerves. Would we never reach that frontier! What was going to happen next? I went stolidly on, however; I was past thinking coherently; I could only keep to the West instinctively.

FINAL ESCAPE

We climbed over a fence and then walked along a clearing in the forest. There was a swamp again, really impassable this time, and we had to go round.

I caught sight of something I took for telephone wires, in the distance; Malsagov said it was nothing of the sort and that I was delirious. When we came nearer to it, we saw that I had been right; they were indeed telephone posts and wires. There was a road in front of us and people on it. My heart beat. We were very conspicuous; a swamp was on each side of us and no way of getting away, if they proved to be Bolsheviks. Something had to be done, however. I did not like the responsibility of risking other people's lives; but it was too late to turn back, and I went on. If they were Bolsheviks we would all be shot in a few seconds, like so many rabbits. I heard Malbrodsky, Sazonov and even Malsagov grumbling away, as they followed me. The latter had always been for the shortest, even if more dangerous road; he now wanted to go back, or round some other way.

We went on. What we had taken for a road turned out to be a river. The people on it were on rafts, floating timber down the river. We came nearer to the water. The men saw us and, springing from log to log, reached the opposite bank. They were on one side of the water, we on the other; with the river between us.

We shouted to them. They did not understand us; we did not understand them; they seemed to be

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

afraid of us. At last a boat was lowered and some men rowed up to the bank on which we stood. They showed us some Finnish coin.

We gave up our rifles . . .

June 22nd. — Started early. Terrible exhaustion. Uncertainty. Difficulty of getting on. Clearing in the forest. Swamp. Telephone wires. River. Men floating timber. Finland.

CHAPTER XXIV

FINLAND

I LEFT off my diary with the word Finland. It was the end of our adventures; the end of a whole period of my life; the end of the unusual existence I had been leading for several years; whether that existence had done me any good or not is another question, but it had been a peculiar kind of life that I had been leading. This was also the end of our sufferings.

A new life was before us; a life full of struggles, but free and real normal life. But I will go on with my story consecutively, as I have done up till now.

We were on the bank of the river. A boat came up and we got into it; there were two men rowing. We sat between them, while they rowed us up the river. I experienced the curious feeling of having attained my object and of nothing being required of me. I had only to let myself be taken somewhere, without any volition on my own part. It was an unaccustomed feeling!

The boat stopped near a village. We got out, and were at once surrounded by a crowd of natives. In spite of seeing Finnish money, the different type of architecture, more civilized surroundings than we had seen in our own country, the thought: 'What if we are still on Soviet territory?' still lurked at the back of my mind. We hardly dared believe that we were really safe abroad.

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

At last all our suspicions disappeared; a man who spoke Russian told us that we were indeed in Finland. There was no more room for doubt.

Part of the crowd followed us into a cottage, and stared at us. They were right in regarding us with curiosity; we must have been an awful sight. Our clothes were burnt, and torn by the branches. Our flesh showed through, in many places. Our feet were almost bare. Our hair was all matted and long. We had not touched a razor for thirty-five days. Our faces were smeared with smoke. We looked real vagabonds. I used to think that the vagabonds I had seen on the screen were greatly exaggerated. But I now knew that they had been exactly right. We were just like cinema vagabonds.

The people who looked at us with such astonishment were clean and tidy; they all wore neat blue coats, warm sweaters, waterproof boots. It all seemed strange and unnatural to us; it was so long since we had seen really well-dressed people, and these were simple peasants and workmen.

We sat down and talked, through an interpreter. We learnt that we were 800 kilometres north of Petrograd, and several miles from the little Finnish town of Kusoma. We also found out that our last raid had been made on Finnish territory. That was the reason the inhabitants looked on us suspiciously. We heard words we could easily understand said about us: 'Bolshevik, Communist.' At the same

FINLAND

time, they offered us money and gave us a good dinner, followed by some coffee.

How good the rice pudding was! But how small and insignificant the little cups of coffee seemed to us! After the meal we were searched. They had certainly taken us for Bolsheviks. We were finally taken to Kusoma by an armed escort!

We were questioned next morning. I tried to explain in broken German aided by pantomime and by showing the way we had come on the map, who and what we were. We had, it seemed, crossed the frontier two days before. The river we had found so difficult to cross, was the frontier between Russia and Finland.

We almost succeeded in proving to the Finns that we were not Bolsheviks, and in inspiring confidence; almost, but not quite. We were taken to the military barracks, and had a soldier to guard us. Our rest began in earnest! We only left off eating to sleep, and awoke in order to have a little more to eat. The cook used to bring us enough to feed fifteen or twenty men. We devoured it all and were as hungry as ever, two or three hours later.

Finns do not make up their minds quickly; the authorities could not decide what was to be done with us; the question required much thought. While we ate and slept, slept and ate, they asked the Uleaborg authorities to tell them what they had better do. The result of these conferences was that we were taken to Uleaborg, and from there sent on

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

to Helsingfors. We got there safely, but found ourselves lodged in a prison!

Of course, the prison was not like those to which we were accustomed. It was perfectly clean, the food was good, we were treated very politely. The only thing I disliked, was a certain dryness that bordered on hardness. But these qualities (or defects) are common to Western civilization. The conclusion that prisoners are human beings, after all, has not yet been reached!

I got into touch with the Russian colony at Helsingfors; several people I knew vouched for my being what I said I was. The intelligence department corroborated the fact of our escape. All our depositions were proved to be true. A bill for 1,000 marks was paid by us, for the bread and soap we had taken on Finnish territory, and, before a month was over, we were free.

It was a lovely day when I first came out of prison. The houses and streets looked clean and attractive. All the people I met were well-dressed, and seemed content and at peace, with themselves and everybody else. I enjoyed seeing normal life around me. I specially enjoyed the feeling of liberty (although I must add that I had enjoyed it even more in the forest). I enjoyed being able to walk in the streets, and going fearlessly wherever I wished.

When I was still in Helsingfors prison I wrote to a friend: 'In outward appearance I am a homeless vagabond: dirty, sunburnt, thin and in rags. At present all I can think of is a pint or two of cocoa, a

FINLAND

pound or two of white bread and a comfortable chair in a convalescent home.'

But I had to earn my living, and I started working next day. I was free, and Life was before me!

EXTRACTS FROM A LETTER TO
MY SISTER

I HAVE finished, dear. That period of my life is over, and I cannot help saying I am sorry; I regret the past now. I was full of bright hopes; I lived in the future. Many of my hopes have been baffled; I am disappointed and disillusioned.

You know what I hoped and ardently wished for, while I was still in Russia. The people among whom I lived, in prison, were the best of all there are to be found in Russia; the élite of all classes and professions. There were clergymen, officers, peasants, tradespeople; representatives of all classes, from the whole length and breadth of Russia. Their sufferings and forced inaction had wrought wonders with them; their outlook on life and things in general had expanded; new ideas had been evolved, their minds had developed, their characters had gained in strength. There are not two opinions among these men, who have suffered and grown strong, about the urgent necessity of delivering the country from the intolerable yoke of a tyrannical Government. Those who are well acquainted with the whole solid structure of the Bolshevik edifice, the powerful Ogpu, the irresponsible despotism of all its branches, and the utter helplessness of those who are considered beyond the pale and scarcely recognized as human beings, are all of one opinion: the country cannot free itself without help from outside. Nor can those in power be expected to

LETTER TO MY SISTER

change for the better. As long as all Christian and human laws are ignored, there is no hope for the country, no hope of any change.

Those who have remained behind go on hoping for assistance to come from the emigrants; from those who are free and leading a normal life in more favoured countries. If it were not for this hope, I do not know how they could bear all their troubles and terrible hardships. It is the hope of relief that keeps them up. When I was still in Russia, I too was buoyed up by this hope. I was sure the emigrants, assisted and upheld by the European countries, would lend us a helping hand. I knew they were free to speak out, to express their opinions openly, to join forces, and form leagues and societies. All these things we were unable to do in Russia. I thought the Revolution had taught them to be united, to act with one idea in view, to think less of their own interests and more of the general good. I hoped that all was in preparation, and they were only waiting for a favourable moment to begin. I expected to find them all closely united, as one, against the common enemy.

I was well aware that those who had left Russia were very different from those who remained in the country. It was not for me to judge who were better, and whose aims were loftier; but I felt there must be a difference. I knew that I belonged entirely to the new Russia, the Russia that had died, and had been born again. I had witnessed the death of the old Russia; I had also witnessed its rebirth,

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

The emigrants say that no *re*-birth is needed; Russia has been, and is, alive. But I persist in saying that I died and that I have been born again, with the new Russia that has come to life. I am as sure of this fact, as that I myself exist. You emigrants are still alive, you have gone on living all the time, you have not died, whereas Russia died, and a new life has begun for her; that is the difference.

I must now tell you my first impressions of life abroad: they were gathered chiefly from the emigrant Press. I had read the Communist papers in Russia and looked upon all I read there as a lot of lies. When I left the country, I expected to find out the real truth, from the Russian papers abroad. I took up the first one I came across, almost reverently, and was surprised to find it full of altercations, and petty quarrels between different political and party leaders; they all seemed to be criticizing each other. At first I thought that it was only my fancy, due to first impressions, or perhaps a coincidence. But the more I read those papers, the more confirmed grew my opinion of the predominant interests of the emigrants: all their endeavours were centred on getting the better of one another, before conquering the enemy. I saw all the old mistakes repeated; all the blunders committed by the White Army were renewed. Political parties, meetings; words, words and words, only words! It was all childish and impotent. Who were the leaders? Why, the same men who had been through the War, two Revolutions and the Civil War, and had been unsuccessful

LETTER TO MY SISTER

each time. It was they who had lost everything, not we younger ones who had been under their orders. All we now asked of them was, that they should retire, give way to us of the younger generation. They are still convinced that Russia is for them; in this they are greatly mistaken, there is not a single man in Russia on their side.

All that I have just said concerns the older generation. What about the younger men, the generation to come, the youths? Are they at least different? Yes, thank God; they are quite different. They are working silently, steadily and patiently in factories, mills, and works of all kinds, at various trades and professions; the majority, in the capacity of simple labourers, doing the most difficult and least conspicuous work. They are silent and uncomplaining. They are unconsciously preparing; unknown to themselves, their spirit is being forged. They are always ready to help a companion in distress. They are working, and enduring. They have no leaders, no heads; they are all brothers; they are the future Russia. They will hold out their hands to our brothers in Russia, and regenerate the country in union with them.

I must now explain what I consider to be the saving of Russia, what my faith, regarding her future, is. The old Russia was strong in her spiritual life; all was pervaded with spiritual and mystical influences; but it was all unconscious, not based on a strong foundation, our knowledge of Christ's teaching. A mystic power was felt in the whole life

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

of the country: the Churches, the Tsars with the humble people who venerated them, the hermits and pilgrims, the workers on the soil in their hard lot; in all these were manifestations of the spiritual life of the country; but it all rested on faith, on intuition. There was no judgment, no knowledge of what it all stood for, not much knowledge of any kind in fact. As soon as the masses came into contact with Western civilization, the partially assimilated learning and knowledge which were badly digested, inevitably brought about the present conditions. There was no foundation strong enough to counteract the pernicious influence of knowledge and learning, only half understood, and foreign to the nature of the people.

Now a new Russia is growing up out of the ruins of the old. I will try and illustrate my meaning. One very cold day, when I was still in Solovetski, I was breaking up ice; my hands were frozen; I could hardly lift up the heavy crow-bar. A young man came up to me. He had a particularly engaging countenance and clear, innocent blue eyes. 'Let me help you, my friend,' he said. I gave him the crow-bar; he was strong and healthy, my work seemed play to him. When he had done, he pushed his cap back and said, almost in a whisper: 'How beautiful!' I did not understand what it was he found beautiful, and said nothing. After a while I addressed him and, having nothing particular to say, asked him for what he had been sent to prison. He smiled, and said: 'I am a Christian.' This

LETTER TO MY SISTER

answer surprised and interested me and I begged him to explain what he meant. 'Does it surprise you? Yes, we are a whole party of Christians, all students of different universities. We ought to be treated as "political prisoners," but as foreigners are much more interested in socialists than in anarchists our rights have not yet been recognized, and we have been on a hunger strike. It is just over; I am out for the first time, after seven days' imprisonment. I enjoy the fresh air. We have nothing really to do with politics, although they call us anarchists. Perhaps we are anarchists. We are certainly not anti-revolutionaries; anti-materialists would be the best name for us. We are neither Whites, nor Reds, we are Blues; we belong to Christ.' The bell rang at that moment. Work was over; we parted, but soon met again.

*

That same evening, after call-over, when all were asleep, I crept up to my new acquaintance's sleeping-berth, and had a long talk with him and his companions. They were all very young men, perfectly healthy, both mentally and bodily. One of them exposed his doctrine to me.

'We are Christians first of all. We believe in, and try to follow, Christ's teaching. His teaching of Love and Truth. His teaching is clear and simple, and at the same time full of Divine Wisdom. He says we are to conquer evil by good, and to love all men. That is practically all. His teaching is all that is wanted as a guide in a man's life.'

M Y T W E N T Y - S I X P R I S O N S

'Socialism denies the existence of God and the Spiritual life. It has taught the humble workers to stand up for their rights, and says that the good of man and class-interests must come foremost, and that they are the best and highest incentives. Theirs is undoubtedly a high aim, but ours is higher still. We preach love of one another, not class-warfare. We do not stand up for one class; the interests of all humanity are dear to us, all humanity united under the banner of Christ. Socialism promised much; it also preached love of man, renouncement; there seemed to be much good in it, but it neglected moral laws and so reached Communism, logically came to Bolshevism. There was no way out for it, it had come to its logical conclusion. Socialism is on the brink of ruin. We think we have found the reason for this crisis. They did not take man's soul into account, ignored God, and man's spiritual life, all that constitutes a human being and distinguishes him from an animal. Man, deprived of all his divine attributes, degenerated into a brute. This is our opinion; we think we have found the way to remedy the mistakes of Socialism. We have found the real Truth, the pure ideal and, what is more, our teaching can easily be put into practice. We are not alone; we have many adherents in Russia; we are all united; here are some letters from numerous friends of ours. There is nothing new in our belief; it was practised in early times. Later, Tolstoy and the Doukhobors preached the same doctrine. Nearly all Russia believes this doctrine to be the right one, but unfor-

LETTER TO MY SISTER

tunately few realize it. Russia is still seeking, but cannot get to understand what it is she is seeking.'

He left off. I saw how firm his faith was, how strongly he felt on the subject, how firmly convinced they all were of the truth of their doctrine. He jumped up, came close up to me and began again:

'Have you understood? I should like to call out loud for everyone to hear: "Russia, my country, all Russian youth, all emigrants, listen to me! Listen and unite under Christ's banner!" A new Russia is being born in suffering and torment. A spiritual rebirth is in progress. My country is torn to pieces, rent asunder, she is weak, helpless, dumb, her old faith is not sufficient to help her out of her present straits. She wants real Christian knowledge and wisdom. We are persecuted, and have much to bear. We cannot associate with our friends, as we would. We want help from outside. If only the first impulse were given, what strength we should put forth! A power strong enough to dissolve the Bolshevik poison, and assimilate all the adherents of Communism. But all these are vain hopes; the people there have not suffered enough.'

He left off and after a while went on more calmly: 'Do you know who are nearest of all to us in spirit and most likely to understand us? You will be surprised; it is the Communists. Yes, the real Communists; not those, of course, who have joined the Party from cupidity, or hope of profit and advancement, but those who are really idealists. They have a faith of their own; they strain after an ideal such

MY TWENTY-SIX PRISONS

as we do. They will come to understand; they will sooner or later turn to Christ. Russians have it in them to be saints or devils, sometimes the two together. Look at Stenka Razin; look at Pougachev; and on the other hand look at all the holy hermits and pilgrims; all are exaggerations, extremes of good or bad. The Bolshevik is a true Russian; he carries everything to extremes. A Russian is never warm, he is either hot or cold. He does not know much about politics; they are not for him. Russia is great and wide. Russia, in all her huge expanse, is seeking for the Truth. No foreign theories can save her. A Russian must learn, first of all, to say: "I am a Christian," then "I am a Russian," and last of all, "I am a monarchist, or a republican," or whatever he may be. Russia wants real wisdom and the teaching of Christ for a strong foundation.'

He left off. We went to the door, and looked out into the night. The camp was still asleep; the sun was not yet up, but the first signs of approaching dawn were visible. The East was tinged with faint streaks of pale pink; the watch-towers showed like two dark spots on the horizon. I felt hopeful for the future of my country, a new dawn was in sight!

Here I no longer see the walls and watch-towers of the convict 'camp,' nor do I see Russia and the coming dawn. . . .



